WOLLSTONECRAFT AS A CRITIC OF BURKE

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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was the first published reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Later replies from the radical side challenged and in a measure qualified Burke's report of the events of 1789, brought out the selective emphasis that guided his record of French history, showed the inadequacy of his sources (a bias sometimes passing into caprice), and sought to unmask his private motive for publishing, so late in life, a work of aristocratic propaganda. It was agreed by the detractors as by the vindicators of Burke that the *Reflections* was addressed to England more than to France, as a sequence of coded warnings against the politics of the Revolution Society and other associations for reform; this, the pamphlet-writers knew, would have been a primary reason for his choice of the word "reflections." On matters like these, Wollstonecraft is not a distinctive guide, and her sparing use of contemporary data may have made her reply appear at once preliminary and oddly aloof. Where Thomas Paine stands out against Burke as a rival narrator of the revolution, and of the miseries of the people which Burke denied a place among the causes of the revolution; where James Mackintosh shows that the changes of 1789 may be consistent with the principles of 1688, and approval of the French Revolution continuous with the traditional Whig view of the "settlement" of 1689; where Joseph Priestley sees how Burke's historicism must be taken to qualify his sense that the British political system "is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world"—in this company, Wollstonecraft can seem to have missed her cue. If, in 1790, one wanted pragmatic help in winning the debate, she would not be one's first choice of an ally. And yet she seems to me a more original moral

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thinker, and a deeper reader of Burke, than any of the large and capable regiment of anti-Burke pamphleteers.

Two facts about the composition of the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* have a circumstantial interest. Wollstonecraft wrote it quickly. The *Reflections* appeared on the first day of November 1790, and by the last day of November copies of the *Vindication* were on sale. An intimate detail gives a more personal coloring to the achievement and may say something too about how to read her argument. Wollstonecraft took on the task of writing against Burke at the suggestion of the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, whose *Analytical Review* she assisted as a reviewer of romances and books of moral philosophy. Some way into the writing, she found that she could not continue; as William Godwin relates the incident in his *Memoir of the Author of the "Rights of Woman"*:

> It was sent to the press, as is the general practice when the early publication of a piece is deemed a matter of importance, before the composition was finished. When Mary had arrived at about the middle of her work, she was seized with a temporary fit of torpor and indolence, and began to repent of her undertaking. In this state of mind, she called, one evening, as she was in the practice of doing, upon her publisher, for the purpose of relieving herself by an hour or two's conversation. Here, the habitual ingenuousness of her nature, led her to describe what had just past in her thoughts. Mr. Johnson immediately, in a kind and friendly way, intreated her not to put any constraint upon her inclination, and to give herself no uneasiness about the sheets already printed, which he would cheerfully throw aside, if it would contribute to her happiness. Mary had wanted stimulus. She had not expected to be encouraged, in what she well knew to be an unreasonable access of idleness. Her friend's so readily falling in with her ill-humour, and seeming to expect that she would lay aside her undertaking, piqued her pride.[1]

And so, says Godwin, she finished. But in this anecdote, I find the explanation of "torpor and indolence" unlikely. A young political writer undertakes to rebuke, in public, the greatest political writer of the age on the appearance of a work in which he seemed to turn against the cause of liberty for which he once fought heroically: how shall we describe the mood of such a person at such a time? Idleness may have been her word, but we are not bound to repeat it. Possibly she "began to repent of her undertaking" from a scruple about the sort of attack she had launched against a mind of Burke's stature. Anyway, the sentiment that Godwin paraphrases from the delicate persuasive tactic of Johnson—that she ought "not to put any constraint upon her inclination"—is in the context equivocal; one may suspect the constraint was prompted by decorum, by feelings of respect and awe, rather more than by idleness.

In its final form, her reply to Burke is free of the virulent strain of slander and insinuation common in the pamphlet wars of the 1790s. She writes ad

hominem when she pleases, but exhibits, much of the time, a strong mixture of respect for the author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

> From the many just sentiments interspersed through the letter before me [i.e., the *Reflections*], and from the whole tendency of it, I should believe you to be a good, though a vain man, if some circumstances of your conduct did not render the inflexibility of your integrity doubtful; and for this vanity a knowledge of human nature enables me to discover such extenuating circumstances, in the very texture of your mind, that I am ready to call it amiable, and separate the public from the private character.[2]

Compare Paine on Burke's "periods, with music in the ear, and nothing in the heart" and on Burke's character, "accustomed kiss the aristocratical hand that hath purloined him from himself." Or Priestley, certain that had Burke lived at the time of the first apostles "you would, according to your general maxim, have cherished your old heathen 'prejudices, because they were old' and have lived and died a humble worshipper of the Gods, and especially the *Goddesses*, of ancient Greece and Rome." Or a smaller talent, Brooke Boothby, avowing, before an all-out parody of Burke's lament for the "age of chivalry," that "Twenty years ago you would not have thought of this revolution as you do now. In the sage caution I think may be discerned something of the timidity of age."[3] These reactions typify the mischief and the confidence of the radical opposition. By contrast the steadiness of Wollstonecraft's engagement with Burke gives her book its special authority as an act of moral imagination.

She understood, as Paine and the suffrage of radical opinion did not, that the basis of Burke's political argument lay in an argument about morality. And she knew that morals in Burke's view—and it was a view she accepted—were themselves constituted by taste and manners. The subtlety with which she illustrates this understanding and brings it to bear in practical criticism makes Wollstonecraft's proper company not Paine and Priestley and Mackintosh, but Wordsworth and Hazlitt in the next generation. Unlike these later authors, however, her purpose in writing about Burke is not appreciative, not even antithetically appreciative. She wants to isolate a truth in his idea of the coherence of taste and morality in order to reverse the direction in which Burke believed his idea necessarily pointed. She will therefore argue, from similar intuitions about the authority of feelings and habits of thought, to a radically different conclusion than any entertained by Burke. Recall that in the *Reflections*, Burke says we must feel the evil of wicked acts sensibly; that is, with the feminine virtue of sensibility enlivening our judgment, and this most pressingly when we feel for the weak and the wronged—his great example being the queen of France during the October days of 1789.

Wollstonecraft will answer that we must feel the evil of wicked acts strongly, sympathetically, with the weight of a judging conscience that is neither masculine nor feminine, and on behalf of the weak who are bound neither to be nor to resemble women. To defeat Burke's soliciting of delicate feelings of pity for the aristocracy, Wollstonecraft had determined to break up his association of aristocracy with a specialized kind of feminine character. She has here a larger interest in exposing the social wrong of any specializing of a virtue to either sex; and for this reason, as I hope to show, the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* holds the germ of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she wrote less than two years later.

For a critic of Burke, to engage him on the subject of taste means to ponder the implications of his elegiac rhapsody on Marie Antoinette. Wollstonecraft mentions the passage only once, when she considers his provocative judgment that, under the system of chivalry in Europe, "vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness." Quoting those words, she says with shock and dismay, "What a sentiment to come from a moral pen!" Because she never confronts the description more directly, yet her reading of it generates her revision of Burkean morality, one needs to recall the peculiar character of the passage: the way it expands an analysis of a single moral response to serve as the paradigm for the ordering of a whole morality; and the hints by which it characterizes the person whom such a response may be supposed to inhabit. In summarizing again the best-known pages of *Reflections*, I aim to describe them from Wollstonecraft's point of view. There is something arbitrary in such a procedure but nothing finally unjust if one believes as I do that she got Burke right.

On October 6, 1789, a crowd of hunger marchers from Paris, who had grown turbulent when they assembled at Versailles, pursued the queen to her chamber with the intent of subjecting her to indignities difficult to imagine. Two of her bodyguards were killed, but the mob was held off by the National Guard and later appeased by the intervention of Lafayette. However, Burke pauses at the moment of impending catastrophe to praise the conduct of the queen, and to narrate his own sympathetic response. She has "borne that day (one is interested that beings made for suffering should suffer well)—in a manner suited to her rank and race, and becoming the offspring of a sovereign distinguished for her piety and her courage."[4] An homage equal to what Burke feels for the queen can only come in the form of a personal memory:

> It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life,

> and splendor, and joy. Oh! What a revolution! and what an heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.—But the age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, and under which vice lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.[5]

Burke traces this amelioration of vice by refinement—of wicked policy by an inherited decency of manners—to the "mixed system of opinion and sentiment" which "had its origin in the ancient chivalry." It was a system "which mitigated kings into companions and raised private men to be fellows with kings." All this was accomplished by "the soft collar of social esteem" which cushions and gently coerces all ranks of society from high to low. As certain compunctions were prescribed for rulers, so certain deferences were inculcated upon their subjects; and so long as both observed the unquestioned practice of such manners, a revolutionary mob was as improbable a social result as an arbitrary ruler. This thought about the tacit yet compelling authority of manners pervades the *Reflections*: Burke has in mind the same symmetry of conduct between high and low within a society when he writes that "Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle." The agreement that cements a tranquil society is all the more real for being tacit. It betokens a standard so far beyond challenge that it need never be positively recorded.

So much for the materials of any living morality. How was the work of personal choice, or ratification, on which such a morality must depend, successfully performed in the gracious time Burke says is past? It was done by a habit of justifying actions which never exposed them to the glare of estimates from sheer utility. Rather, moral judgments were rendered complex and were made more sure of themselves, by virtue of "the decent drapery of life." This drapery, as Burke explains, is a metaphor for "all the super-added ideas [concerning the worthiness of beauty, for example, just because it is beautiful, and the rightness of docility toward established power], furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination."[6] As he elaborates the conception,

the drapery and super-added ideas are like the clothing of a woman, naturally respected by all but those who think such layers are *just* ideological coverings. Little as we know about modern revolutionaries, we know this kind of assault is within reach of their character. So the victim in the Burkean scene of revolutionary catastrophe turns out to be a woman who should have been rescued. The spectator, whom Burke imagines as capable of actually saving her, is a man of a certain sort; a man who feels himself to exemplify "the spirit of a gentleman"; who thinks that "to make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely"; who, when he feels differently from others, or when he feels the same, can justify himself with confidence by saying "it is *natural* I should." For such a man, the responses of moral action are directly related to the judgments enforced by delicacy of taste. He will unquestioningly associate the proprieties of social life with the proprieties of art. When he feels doubtful, he will apply for direction to the masters of "the moral constitution of the heart," an ideal tribunal that consists, above all, of poets who know "the feelings of humanity." His mind filled by the teaching of the imaginative school of moral sentiments, such a man, contemplating the sufferings of the queen on October 6, will say with Burke: "Some tears might be drawn from me if such a spectacle were exhibited on the stage." The theatrical test is conclusive.

I have described the susceptible male character Burke represents when he writes as a spectator of the revolution informed by chivalric ideas; and I have done so as if one were obliged to approach the character schematically, or from an unfamiliar distance. But the truth is that the character was well known at the end of the eighteenth century—writers and readers had a name for him. He was the "man of feeling," the "man of sensibility." Imagine now the situation of Mary Wollstonecraft as she set out to describe the book on France by the admirer of the queen of France. It is important never to forget that Wollstonecraft hated the violence against Marie Antoinette. She saw it as a savage and regressive act—not an excusable excess and not a liberating stroke against piety—and four years later her *View of the French Revolution* makes a conclusive judgment of the October days. She calls the mob "vagabonds," and the raising of the mob by the duke of Orleans

> one of the blackest of the machinations that have since the revolution disgraced the dignity of man, and sullied the annals of humanity. Disappointed in their main object, these wretches beheaded two of the guards, who fell into their hands; and hurried away towards the metropolis, with the *insignia* of their atrocity on the points of the barbarous instruments of vengeance—showing in every instance, by the difference of their conduct, that they were a set of monsters, distinct from the people.[7]

She will not allow the conduct of the mob to cool her advocacy of *the people*, any more than she will be seduced by zeal to palliate the crimes of a revolution.

But Wollstonecraft would have intensely disliked Burke's symbolic and rhetorical use of the interlude. Half of her life, she sometimes felt, had been wasted in reading novels intended to instruct and please, whose heroines shared the traits of the queen of France as Burke painted her. In these novels, too, a unique power of agency was assigned to the man capable of acting on the heroine's behalf. In order to feel properly for her, the hero was emotionally disposed to be something like a woman; yet his displays of valor were such as to obviate any moral action by the woman herself: "ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult." She notes dryly in the *View of the French Revolution* that "*swords had ceased to leap out of their scabbards* when beauty was not deified,"[8] but even without the later testimony one can see well enough what the plot of the *Reflections* must have looked like to her. The worst feature of the book, as she read it, was the narrowing of scope that followed from the "gothic affability" of a narrator like Burke, and his consequent indifference to what she calls "the silent majesty of misery." Meanwhile, phrases like "decent drapery" worked as eulogistic concealments for a heroine who did nothing because it was her place to do nothing but supply gentle bait for the hero of sensibility; a heroine whose moral duty was to be, so that men might do; and whose practice of the special feminine virtue of modesty could disarm any accusation of artful dealings or moral obliquity. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft would quote Catherine Macaulay: "There is but one fault which a woman of honor may not commit with impunity"—that fault namely which would give her a character of immodesty. This much, Wollstonecraft had already discerned from Burke's portrait of the queen. For the queen was no different in kind from the well-rewarded girl of humbler birth who formed the weak moral center of the standard novel or romance.

Once Wollstonecraft has established that Burkean chivalry is another name for the cult of sensibility, she has her target well in view. I do not underrate the power of irony that was necessary to reach that point. It took genius to get there; and an accompanying clarity of purpose comes out in incidental touches—in the way she alludes, in passing, to "cold, romantic characters" who are full of artificial feelings; where by a simple juxtaposition (cold, romantic) she catches Burke's sentimental theory in a contradiction it engenders from within. Once we concede all moral feelings are learned to the point of being a second nature and seeming in retrospect to have been untaught, what is to prevent the responses they prompt from becoming unfelt

as well as unreflective? But the allusive arguments in Wollstonecraft are often more pointed than this. She traces in literal detail the consequences of Burke's aphorism about vice losing half its evil by losing all its grossness. Fully worked out as a prescriptive ethics, his sentence implies that virtue stained by grossness has a lower position in the moral scale than vice given luster by refinement. Wollstonecraft reduces the thesis to a pair of examples. "Stealing, whoring, and drunkenness" are on this theory more blamable than "overreaching [in its old sense of fraud], adultery, and coquetry"[9]—even though the former vices, gross as they are, need not "obliterate every moral sentiment," while the latter "reduce virtue to an empty name" and thus threaten the very principle of society. The examples are calculated to bring a maximum of discomfort to the reader who has understood and taken satisfaction in Burke's paradox. *Vice lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness*: he meant, with those words, to defend hypocrisy as a practice consistent with the socialized understanding of shame; whereas, according to the same logic, the Jacobins, by tearing the veil from every moral practice, have created an ethic at once antihypocritical and perfectly shameless. Wollstonecraft here replies that it is a condition of the paradox that Burke should blame vices which are merely self-destructive or bluntly transgressive, while he spares vices which entail a hardened contempt for the moral being of others. The half virtues of the hypocrisy that Burke wants to half-praise all have this in common, that they treat persons as means. This refined morality will sooner tolerate Valmont than Sir Toby Belch, and that is part of what Wollstonecraft has in mind when she remarks (addressing Burke in person): "your politics and morals, when simplified, would undermine religion and virtue to set up a spurious, sensual beauty, that has long debauched your imagination, under the specious form of actual feelings."[10] The key phrase seems to me "undermine religion." Burke, she judges, has an irreligious conception of virtue; for her, virtue will prove inseparable from religious faith. It is not an innate quality, to be calmly accepted, but must be acquired by struggle. If things were otherwise, with what possible purpose could we associate our experiences on earth?

Like Paine after her, Wollstonecraft agrees with many particulars of Burke's criticism of the National Assembly and of the Paris mob that was first the servant, then the master of the assembly. Like Paine, too, she blames their errors on the history of corrupt social relations in France. Not the wrong judgments of the revolutionaries, but the depraved feelings that are the legacy of despotism, have produced these effects. It would have been better if the abolition of titles had not been the work of those who "had no titles to sacrifice," and whose conduct may accordingly be construed as simple revenge. This repeats Burke's strictures against the lawyers of a low type who

formed a great proportion of the assembly—"men not taught habitually to respect themselves; who had no previous fortune in character at stake; who could not be expected to bear with moderation, or to conduct with discretion, a power which they themselves, more than any others, must be surprized to find in their hands."[11] Wollstonecraft observes, in the same key, "Weak minds are always timid. And what can equal the weakness of mind produced by servile flattery, and the vapid pleasure that neither hope nor fear seasoned?"[12] But in a society where equal claims were granted to men and women, or to those with much property and those with little, strong minds would be formed by the contest of judgment so as mutually to fortify the different parties. As it is, the only opportunity for rich and poor, for men and women, has been mutual corruption. There is much additional evidence in the *Rights of Men* that Wollstonecraft already supposed a society is good exactly in the degree that it permits the development of the moral courage of individual minds. "To argue from experience, it should seem as if the human mind, averse to thought, could only be opened by necessity; for, when it can take opinions on trust, it gladly lets the spirit lie quiet in its gross tenement."[13] Her phrasing is scrupulous and has an uncommon resonance for those who have read Burke with care.

Necessity is a crucial idea everywhere in Burke, but an idea whose influence is often hidden. A mind gifted with a potent imagination of disaster, who virtually defines prudence as the accommodation of diverse interests to obviate sudden change, Burke thinks of necessity as the critical moment of privation or blank that all politics are directed to avoid. Inertia, and the presence of an inert class in society, come into his idea of political health at some cost in paradox, just for the sake of avoiding the necessity which supplies a main motive for action in more volatile theorists. The thought of necessity is to Burke what the thought of death is to Hobbes. In the face of this aversion, Wollstonecraft lays it down that the sheer stimulus or excitement that comes from necessity may be requisite to the spiritual activity of an individual mind. She writes vividly against the conception of virtue as an innate capacity with which Burke has guarded his idea of an uninterrupted order:

> Every thing looks like a means, nothing like an end, or point of rest, when we can say, now let us sit down and enjoy the present moment; our faculties and wishes are proportioned to the present scene; we may return without repining to our sister clod. And, if no conscious dignity whisper that we are capable of relishing more refined pleasures, the thirst of truth appears to be allayed; and thought, the faint type of an immaterial energy, no longer bounding it knows not where, is confined to the tenement that affords it sufficient variety.[14]

That the development of virtue has no visible termination and no point of rest seems to Wollstonecraft "one of the strongest arguments for the natural immortality of the soul."

Burke in the *Reflections* sometimes writes as if he believes that virtue is a habit, sometimes as if he believes that it is an instinct: the famous phrase, "prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit," splits the difference. Wollstonecraft, I think, confirms his preponderant emphasis when she denies that virtue can be an instinct. But she parts company with him in identifying the kind of acquired power it is. It does not, she says, spring from and does not trace its authority to the conventional life of society, which could hardly advance two moments together without the work of habit. It is rather a habit acquired by the soul in its contest with adversity, or the soul struggling in the usual current of unforeseeable questionings. Burke said that the people of England "know we have made no discoveries in morality. We know that no discoveries are to be made." It may be true that all societies are partial successes—true enough to discourage any revolution that induces sudden and widespread suffering in any class in society. Maybe, in this sense, no discoveries have been made. But Wollstonecraft, because she believes in "genuine acquired virtue," sees what a sophistical gloss Burke's *we* incorporates. Is it true of each person subsumed by his "we" that he or she has made no discovery in morality, through the medium of thought and feeling in a world that allows both thought and feeling some inroads in action? To deny this freedom seems to Wollstonecraft an act of metaphysical supererogation as bad as anything Burke castigates in the Jacobins; for, to her, virtue has reality only as a personal discovery that is wholly guided neither by its beginning nor its end:

> If virtue be an instinct, I renounce all hope of immortality; and with it all the sublime reveries and dignified sentiments that have smoothed the rugged path of life: it is all a cheat, a lying vision; I have disquieted myself in vain; for in my eye all feelings are false and spurious, that do not rest on justice as their foundation, and are not concentred by universal love.
>
> I reverence the rights of men.—Sacred rights! for which I acquire a more profound respect, the more I look into my own mind; and, professing these heterodox opinions, I still preserve my bowels; my heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies—and I FEAR God!
>
> I bend with awful reverence when I enquire on what my fear is built.—I fear that sublime power, whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good; and I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces from this view of my dependence on him.—It is not his power that I fear—it is not to an arbitrary will, but to an unerring *reason* that I submit.[15]

Some precise inferences are to be made from the phrasing of this credo.

By her assertion that "If virtue be an instinct, I renounce all hope of immortality," Wollstonecraft may seem to evade analysis by retreating to an intuition. But her intent is plain from the earlier passages of the *Rights of Men* concerning the tyranny of prescription in society and the deference to prejudice as "untaught feelings," of which she speaks with the bitterness one may justly feel against a social scheme that promotes satisfaction with things as they are. If the finite and given sources of contentment are all we exist for, "Let us," she says, "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die—and die for ever!" On this view, God created human life for no more inventive purpose than is evident in the creatureliness of animals—each with its designated and undeflectable function—so that, quite oddly, the idea of innate virtue returns us to the anti-imaginative and even the utilitarian measure of things which Burke himself acutely satirized: the measure by which "a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order." To the reader of the *Vindication* who keeps the *Reflections* in view, it becomes gradually clear that Wollstonecraft does think of Burke as an irreligious mind.

She is at least so far warranted that one cannot conceive the words "I FEAR God" or anything remotely like them, inhabiting the structure of the *Reflections*, unless the words were quickly followed by allusions to his coequal fear of the king and parliament and the ancient constitution. Society is his God; and Wollstonecraft sees this clearly: a page after the declaration I have just quoted, she transcribes a paragraph of Burke in which he writes of the happy result "when the people have emptied themselves of all the lust of selfish will." In that state, "in their nomination to office," says Burke, "they will not appoint to the exercise of authority as to a pitiful job, but as to an holy function." At the last turn of phrase, Wollstonecraft pounces:

> Sir, let me ask you, with manly plainness—are these *holy* nominations? Where is the booth of religion? Does she mix her awful mandates, or lift her persuasive voice, in those scenes of drunken riot and bestial gluttony? Does she preside over those nocturnal abominations which so evidently tend to deprave the manners of the lower class of people? . . . Yet, after the effervescence of spirits, raised by opposition, and all the little and tyrannic arts of canvassing are over—quiet souls! They only intend to march rank and file to say YES—or NO.[16]

How did Burke arrive at a habit of thinking of politics as sacred?—a habit so deep it could surprise, one imagines, even him in his casual choice of a word, and a habit the more curious in view of its resemblance to a leading fault he will later impute to the Jacobins: that they have been led by political fanaticism to "compound with their nature," and so have cheated themselves of the knowledge that only human feelings are sacred, and the deepest of

those feelings are reserved for a person who suffers. Wollstonecraft thinks she knows how he fell into the error; I take her to be describing that process when she says he was misled by "the sophistry of asserting that nature leads us to reverence our civil institutions from the same principle that we venerate aged individuals." This she calls "a palpable fallacy 'that is so like truth, it will serve the turn as well.' "[17] In what does the sophistry consist? Burke has perhaps deceived himself before deceiving others, by the ascription of natural and metaphorical dignity to a fact in itself sufficiently artificial and banal. He has linked two disparate kinds of feeling by selecting out the mere common quality of age—as if that alone, which does bring associations of respect or habitual regard, necessarily brought also associations of dearness and home-felt attachment. The truth is that a corporate body has no soul, and we do not feel, even for living institutions of which we ourselves are members, quite in the same way that we do for individuals.

It will now be clear how thoroughly Wollstonecraft assimilates Burke's thinking about morality to her separate aim as a political moralist. Her argument for genuine acquired virtue builds on his argument for a moral imagination, but it need not therefore support the whole pattern of prescriptive usages he saw as the inevitable consequence. Wollstonecraft shows that Burke's beliefs, followed in their whole length, are by nature no more reactionary than they are revolutionary—though, under a system where inveterate abuses have grown habitual, they will tend to the revolutionary side. Yet this substantial accomplishment still leaves something wanting from the author of a book called *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. "The rights of men," as invoked by anyone in the 1790s, implied a conviction of the necessity of righting the balance between the happiness of a few and the unhappiness of many; but so vast a change is bound to look like a sacrifice to some, in their capacity as individual minds which Wollstonecraft holds sacred. She is aware that an answer is expected here, and her response is so intricate, yet so deliberately stated, in contrast with the rapid controversial style which dominates the pamphlet, that her emerging argument can easily pass unobserved. She writes,

> The justice of God may be vindicated by a belief in a future state; but, only by believing that evil is educing good for the individual, and not for an imaginary whole. The happiness of the whole must arise from the happiness of the constituent parts, or the essence of justice is sacrificed to a supposed grand arrangement. And that may be good for the whole of a creature's existence, that disturbs the comfort of a small portion. The evil which an individual suffers for the good of the community is partial, it must be allowed, if the account is settled by death.—But the partial evil which it suffers, during one stage of existence, to render another stage more perfect, is strictly just. The Father of all only can

> regulate the education of his children. To suppose that, during the whole or part of its existence, the happiness of any individual is sacrificed to promote the welfare of ten, or ten thousand, other beings—is impious. But to suppose that the happiness, or animal enjoyment, of one portion of existence is sacrificed to improve and ennoble the being itself, and render it capable of more perfect happiness, is not to reflect on either the goodness or wisdom of God.[18]

It is important to see what place this apology leaves for political action and what kind of action it eminently permits or prohibits. By the argument above, Wollstonecraft is committed unconditionally to renounce all political acts which require the sacrifice even of one individual for the welfare of ten thousand. To assume that such an act could be justified involves the belief that the account is settled by death, the belief that the only life after death is the life of society which we agree to make our religion, the same belief that Burke found unacceptable in the Jacobins and that Wollstonecraft finds unacceptable in Burke. Her strictures also evidently rule out a defense of any general proscription or persecution ending in killing, or in the punishment of unsuspecting persons found newly guilty under a new law. The argument does not rule out the compelled transfer of property, nor does it exclude certain forms of late, and perhaps of compelled, education for offenders whose crimes descend from the regular habits of an old regime. That, I believe, would have been a main implication to Wollstonecraft (who thought of herself primarily as an educator) of the phrase about one portion of existence being "sacrificed to improve and ennoble the being itself, and render it capable of more perfect happiness." The sacrifice is tolerable within an individual life, to advance individual happiness. But it may feel like a sacrifice. "Virtue can flourish only amongst equals," she will say near the end of the book;[19] and this discovery may be initially shocking to some of those whom it finally benefits.

The last observation seems to presuppose the idea that the rich are unconscious sufferers on account of their own advantages. Wollstonecraft does see them in that light and in doing so she borrows uncannily from Burke, even as, once again, she shifts the weight of his conclusion. It remains today a puzzle about the *Reflections* that a man of talent and energy like Edmund Burke should have chosen to devote a panegyric to the inertia of the aristocracy. What had he in common with them? "Is it," asks Wollstonecraft, "among the list of possibilities that a man of rank and fortune *can* have received a good education? How can he discover that he is a man, when all his wants are instantly supplied, and invention is never sharpened by necessity?"[20] Education itself makes us conceive fresh wants, makes us also interested in distinction, and therefore, whether we please to think so or not, makes us

interested in something besides the present state of things. At least, this holds true for individuals as we reflect on ourselves. Nothing but the limits of our imagination prevents us from applying the moral generally. Burke, as Wollstonecraft means to suggest, is himself a typical beneficiary of education; in fact, she thinks he wrote the book mainly with a thought of distinction for himself. "You have said many things merely for the sake of saying them well." And again, "You make as much noise to convince the world that you despise the revolution, as Rousseau did to persuade his contemporaries to let him live in obscurity."[21] Had Burke been a Frenchman, she surmises, he would have stood with the advocates of the revolution. It is an affectation in him to plead for those whose every want has been assured in advance.

In all this train of thought, Wollstonecraft is as close as usual to the texture of the *Reflections*. She is remembering a passage so equivocal that most of Burke's commentators for two centuries have overlooked it, a paragraph strangely touched by apologetic pity for the rich, and impossible to reconcile with Burke's announced purpose of acquitting the dignity of the aristocracy.

> They too are among the unhappy. They feel personal pain and domestic sorrow. In these they have no privilege, but are subject to pay their full contingent to the contributions levied on mortality. They want this sovereign balm under their gnawing cares and anxieties, which being less conversant about the limited wants of animal life, range without limit, and are diversified by infinite combinations in the wild and unbounded regions of imagination. Some charitable dole is wanting to these, our often very unhappy brethren, to fill the gloomy void that reigns in minds which have nothing on earth to hope or fear; something to relieve in the killing languor and over-laboured lassitude of those who have nothing to do; something to excite an appetite to existence in the palled satiety which attends on all pleasures which may be bought, where nature is not left to her own process, where even desire is anticipated, and therefore fruition defeated by meditated schemes and contrivances of delight; and no interval, no obstacle, is interposed between the wish and the accomplishment.[22]

I am uncertain what to make of this passage—how to fit it into any construal of the *Reflections* or even to explain by what means it got there. It has going somewhere underneath it the very cold and savage style of wit that five years later will dominate Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord*, and, with that, a tone of continuous vexing irony that is pragmatically serviceable to no political side. But Wollstonecraft could with equal plausibility have read this passage as one more bizarre exercise of overwrought sensibility—a faculty, she says, by nature liable to perverse and self-regarding displays. What could top the aristocratic sensibility of an author who sees that the aristocrats themselves labor under a pathetic want of interest in life, and who concludes

that they can be helped, if they can be helped at all, by a "charitable dole" of sentiments from someone both below and above their rank, a moralist uniquely charged with the memory of the sentiments of mankind?

A view of Wollstonecraft's engagement with Burke ought to end where it begins, with the passion that animated her revolt against sensibility. This was a lifelong argument for her, and I close by looking back at her source and forward to the results in the second *Vindication*. Further back than the *Reflections*, her prompting came from the Burke of the *Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*. To recall the broad divisions of that book, the beautiful is feminine, and its typical qualities are to be fair, little, smooth, weak, unimpeding. The sublime is masculine, and its typical qualities are to be irregular or infinite in successiveness, grand, rough, strong, and so much an obstacle that we can only encounter it safely as an idea. The beautiful is a possession we can care for, the sublime a threatening encumbrance that may possess us. Burke makes plain how far the sexual character of the distinction may reach when he says the authority of a father is too mixed with an idea of strength to admit the sentiment of love we feel for a mother. (Not so, or much less so, in the case of a grandfather, where terror is mitigated by distance and a less severe regimen of compelled docility.) In short, "we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in the one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance."[23] Thus, not only is sublimity associated with admiration and unwilling submission, and beauty with love and voluntary submission, but, in Burke's identification of sublimity with pain and beauty with pleasure, he admits no possibility of combination between the beautiful and the sublime that does not entirely destroy the beautiful. The sublime, on the other hand, may on occasion be softened without altogether losing its character of power. It follows that the beautiful, the containable thing that solicits but does not demand compliance, may endear us by its very irregularities or defects; and part 3, section 9 of the *Sublime and Beautiful*, under the heading "Perfection not the cause of beauty," includes these sentences in Burke's empiricist-dandyish style, which Wollstonecraft must have known by heart:

> So far is perfection, considered as such, from being the cause of beauty; that this quality, where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. . . .I know, it is in every body's mouth, that we ought to love perfection. This is to me a sufficient proof, that it is not the proper object of love.[24]

To present Wollstonecraft's reply to this thought has been part of my motive in discussing the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. The reply is still going strong in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

She observes there that in a Burkean or sentimental morality, women are trapped by the requirement that they seek love by display of the same characteristics that defeat self-respect. "As a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, etc.? If there be but one criterion of morals, but one archetype for man, women appear to be suspended by destiny, according to the vulgar tale of Mahomet's coffin."[25] It may be said in extenuation of the *Sublime and Beautiful* that four decades of sentimental novels had done more to corrupt morality than a single, early, though very widely read theoretical romance by Edmund Burke. Wollstonecraft concedes as much; but the particular damage of Burke's morality of manners was, as she saw it, to give a sanction, in the higher walks of art and politics, to a way of thinking that might otherwise have fallen into disrepute as an obvious outgrowth of libertinism. She herself in the *Rights of Men* had called sensibility a libertine morality; in the *Rights of Woman*, she will associate it with "a kind of sentimental lust" she thinks peculiarly French. But the polemical victories she had scored in the *Rights of Men* were not fully recognized, and so she returned to the topic in earnest and at length. The *Rights of Woman* offers a notable positive program, and if one numbers among its achievements the reasoned case for coeducation, and the unforgettable challenge to the idea of heroic virtues, it makes no sense to trace those elements to Wollstonecraft's dispute with Burke. Yet in the later book, it is again her polemical motive that prods her invention, and the tactics she discovered two years earlier now emerge as more than tactics.

In writing explicitly for the advancement of women, Wollstonecraft saw that she had to do two things: first, to show that fair defects are not only the property of the fair, by tracing how in society the same traits are picked up by others whose accidents or disproportions of education closely resemble those of women; and second, to cast doubt on the thesis that the beautiful can allow no admixture of the sublime unless it would renounce its claim to beauty. The persons, besides women, who exhibit most conspicuously the presence of fair defects turn out to be soldiers—an adventurous comparison which no other pamphleteer would have dared and none could possibly have carried off:

> Soldiers [like women] acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation, and, from continually mixing with society, they gain, what is termed a knowledge of the world. . . .Soldiers, as well as women, practise the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. . . .It may be further observed, that officers are also

> particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule. Like the *fair* sex, the business of their lives is gallantry.—They were taught to please, and they live only to please.[26]

The case is clinched by the unprejudiced plainness of the analogy. By contrast, the argument that gentleness, suffering, and a passionate endurance may be elements of the sublime as well as the beautiful, seems impossible to advance against Burke, until one thinks of the example of Jesus Christ. Conscious that some of what appears most chivalric in the Burkean morality is also un-Christian, Wollstonecraft simply marks the example with everything it may prove: "Gentleness of manners, forbearance and long-suffering, are such amiable Godlike qualities, that in sublime poetic strains the Deity has been invested with them; and, perhaps, no representation of His goodness so strongly fastens on the human affections as those that represent Him abundant in mercy and willing to pardon."[27] This sentence closes the confrontation. The divergence of premises between Burke and Wollstonecraft turns out to be greater, after all, than appeared from their unexpected affinity of motives in 1790. In answer to Burke's identification of prejudice with untaught feelings, Wollstonecraft will remark later in the *Rights of Woman* that "A prejudice is a fond obstinate persuasion for which we can give no reason; for the moment a reason can be given for an opinion, it ceases to be a prejudice."[28] But there are obstinacies that outlast every reason, even in the thoroughly educated. Burke's fear of disorder was a prejudice of this kind, and the religion of society was his rational-sounding answer to the fear. In the end, Wollstonecraft's faith in individual conscience is a prejudice of the same kind, and fear of God and of herself is the name she finds for a rational obstinacy equal to Burke's.

NOTES

1. William Godwin, *Memoir of the Author of the "Rights of Woman"* (London and New York: Penguin, 1987), chap. 6, 230.

2. *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (London: Pickering, 1989), 5:7-8. I use volume 5 of the *Works* hereafter for the text of both *Vindications*.

3. Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (London and New York: Penguin, 1984), 46, 51; Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, occasioned by his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 3rd ed. (London: Joseph Johnson, 1791), 61; Brooke Boothby, *A Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: J. Debrett, 1791), 21.

4. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London and New York: Penguin, 1968), 169.

5. Burke, *Reflections*, 169-70.

6. Ibid., 171.

7. Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe*, vol. 6, *Works*, 206.

8. Ibid., 189.

9. Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:25.

10. Ibid., 48.

11. Burke, *Reflections*, 130.

12. Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:47.

13. Ibid., 19.

14. Ibid., 16.

15. Ibid., 33-4.

16. Ibid., 36.

17. Ibid., 49.

18. Ibid., 52-3.

19. Ibid., 57.

20. Ibid., 42.

21. Ibid., 29, 44.

22. Burke, *Reflections*, 201. *Even*, in the penultimate clause, looks like a printer's error for *every*.

23. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 113. A sensitive consideration of the *Rights of Men*, in the light of Burke's feminine definition of beauty, can be found in Harriet Devine Jump, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Writer* (London: Harvester, 1994), chap. 3.

24. Burke, *Enquiry*, 110.

25. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, vol. 5, *Works*, 103.

26. Ibid., 92-3.

27. Ibid., 101-2.

28. Ibid., 182.

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