



# “Whither am I wandering?” A journey into the Self – Mary Wollstonecraft’s travels in Scandinavia, 1795

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## Abstract

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*To place the letters written by Mary Wollstonecraft from Scandinavia to her lover, Gilbert Imlay, besides the journal in epistolary form that she published on her return to England, is to discern something of the complexity of Wollstonecraft’s personality. The two sets of documents, each of distinctive interest, reveal by their juxtaposition the struggle of an intelligent woman to reconcile her feelings and her reason as she strives to pursue a trajectory towards the emotional and financial independence that she had claimed for women in her polemical work **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**.*

*The comparison between the two sets of documents also demonstrates the ways in which the characteristics of the letter – its potentiality for immediacy, for the expression of the self and the emotions – are consciously shaped in the published **Letters**. Such strategies are designed for the perceived reader in each case: on the one hand, Imlay himself and, on the other, all those readers likely to purchase a work from the imprint of Joseph Johnson.*

## Opsomming

“Waarheen swerf ek?” ’n Reis na die Self – Mary Wollstonecraft se reise in Skandinawië, 1795

*As ’n mens die briewe wat Mary Wollstonecraft uit Skandinawië aan haar minnaar, Gilbert Imlay, geskryf het, plaas naas die dagboek in briefvorm wat sy met haar terugkeer na Engeland gepubliseer het, bespeur jy iets van die kompleksiteit van Wollstonecraft se persoon-*

*likheid. Die jukstaponering van die twee stelle dokumente, elkeen van uiteenlopende belang, openbaar die stryd van 'n intelligente vrou om haar emosies en haar rede te versoen terwyl sy poog om 'n weg te baan na die emosionele en finansiële onafhanklikheid wat sy in haar polemiese werk, **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**, as noodsaaklik vir vroue beskou het.*

*Die vergelyking tussen die twee stelle dokumente demonstreer ook die wyse waarop die kenmerke van die briefvorm – die potensiaal vir onmiddellikheid, vir die uitdrukking van die self en van emosies – bewus vorm kry in the gepubliseerde **Briewe**. Sodanige strategieë word aangewend vir die beoogde leser van elkeen van die twee stelle briewe: Imlay self aan die een kant, en aan die ander kant alle moontlike lesers van Joseph Johnson se uitgawe.*

## 1. The context

In the last days of September 1795 Mary Wollstonecraft, aged 36, was *en route* back to England after almost four months of traveling in Scandinavia, an unusual part of Europe to visit. More unusual still was the fact that she had been on a business trip on behalf of Gilbert Imlay her lover and the father of her one-year-old daughter, Fanny. Unusual too was that Fanny accompanied her mother on most of this trip. Added to these highly unusual aspects was the basic anomaly of a lone woman travelling at all in a period when the public and the private spheres were becoming more and more sharply demarcated. The public world was for men, a woman's natural sphere was her home. Jeanne Moskal (1995:174) reminds us that we have "inherited a cultural tradition that associates travel with sexual freedom" and that women in the late eighteenth century still faced "the stigma of the woman traveler". Eric J. Leed has emphasised that travel has been an "inescapably gendered and gendering activity" (quoted in Moskal, 1995:174). To travel and to publicise that fact was not deemed appropriate for a woman in a society where, as we read in *Pride and Prejudice*, even "[t]o walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone ... seems ... to show an abominable sort of conceited independence ..." (Austen, 1981:26). Yet not only did Mary Wollstonecraft undertake this solitary business trip into a little known area of Europe, she turned these experiences into financial gain within three months of returning to England. In January 1796 *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* was published by Joseph Johnson (referred to below as *Letters*). This publication documents not only a literal journey but also a metaphorical one, a journey towards independence, an independence striven for not without much

emotional trauma. As she journeys through Scandinavia, responsibly fulfilling the clandestine business on behalf of Imlay, she strives to come to terms with her growing awareness that he is deserting her and their child.<sup>1</sup> This painful subtext is more directly the subject of the private letters written during these same months to Imlay. In these letters is revealed the depth of her depression and the emotional strain that a single mother undergoes when trying to forge an independent life.<sup>2</sup> Her physical journeying comes increasingly to mirror the weary struggle to reach the goal of independence and fulfilment that she had argued was the right of every woman to attain.<sup>3</sup>

In juxtaposing the public and the private letters, one is able to gain not only some insight into the ways the private and the public interconnect but also how the private letter and that intended for publication utilise differing strategies and present a distinctive persona suited to the assumed reader in each case.<sup>4</sup> Given our access to both sets of documents, we can also gain a deeper understanding of Wollstonecraft's precarious emotional state and her courageous professionalism in the face of such fragility. While with her right hand, so to speak, she composes the documentary letters filled predominantly with common sense and rationality, wit and self-irony, with her left hand she writes letters saturated with agonising emotional expressions of weakness, misery and loneliness. The two sets of documents allow us to trace Wollstonecraft's personal struggle to attain that desired equilibrium of reason and emotion on which the period put such store. As a child of the Enlightenment, coming to maturity in the early Romantic period, Wollstonecraft reveals the importance of acknowledging both feeling and reason as two legitimate modes of our understanding. This awareness was gained from experience, it was never merely theoretical. Her valorisation of feeling as well as of reason was to

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1 For a good brief account of these months see Richard Holmes's introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the *Letters* (1987).

2 For a good account of the love letters to Imlay as a whole see Mary Jacobus (2001:274-289).

3 See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, especially Chapter 9.

4 The shortened title *Letters* will be used for the 1796 publication, referenced under Holmes. The private letters to Imlay will be referred to as "the private letters" in the text and referenced under Wardle.

influence markedly the thoughts of William Godwin with whom she was to become seriously involved after January 1796.

## 2. Letters from abroad

As the great epistolary novels of the 18th century demonstrate, the letter form was a genre with a very specific agenda. By its very nature it was a means of conveying the personal and the immediate and was the perfect medium for illuminating the private self, an interest which increasingly characterised the Romantic period. The expression of emotional content was condoned in the letter form and this was partly why it was seen to be a naturally feminine mode of expression. Women thus made contact with those beyond the walls that confined them. If the letter writer is away from home, the letter can form a bond with the known from the perspective of the unfamiliar. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Letters* were perhaps the most famous penned by a woman from abroad before Wollstonecraft's own.<sup>5</sup> The letter from abroad could also combine the vogue for descriptions of unfamiliar places with the increasing interest in the traveller's personal response to the landscape. Such responses chimed well with the growing interest in the concepts of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque, while also satisfying the developing interest in the autobiographical subject. What is of added interest in Wollstonecraft's case is that we have the two sets of documents from this Scandinavian journey. By comparing and contrasting these we can see how the formal epistolary genre was a self-conscious adaptation of the desire to communicate with another.

The status of the *Letters* has been debated. The consensus among biographers of Wollstonecraft seems to be that these were always distinct from the actual letters posted to Imlay. The *Letters* were published within months of her return with, it would seem, very little revision.<sup>6</sup> Although the published *Letters* is very clearly a *public* correspondence, the recipient is undeniably Imlay. The fact that this work is cast in the form of letters to an intimate allows for the charming combination of the amorous and the informative – a

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5 The *Turkish Letters* were circulated in manuscript from the 1730s and published in 1763, the year after Lady Mary's death (see Feldman & Kelley, 1995).

6 Harriet Devine Jump (1994:115) summarises the various speculations of the various biographers as to the distinction between the two sets of documents in *Mary Wollstonecraft Writer*.

combination which did much to attract readers, of whom Godwin was only the most seriously affected. Wollstonecraft's actual circumstances reflected one of the popular themes of the early Romantic period which has been defined by Claire Tomalin (1977: 228) thus: "a solitary traveller wandering through wild, rugged and remote places, and suffering from the absence and indifference of a lover". When one compares the private letters with the *Letters* one realises how Wollstonecraft shaped her experiences into a publication suited to the prevailing tastes. In a variety of ways – the careful footnote, the addition of a brief *Appendix* summarising her belief in perfectibility, the two *Supplementary Notes* at the end with their detailed statistics and facts re taxation – she anchors the impressions firmly in masculinist pedagogy. In each of the *Letters* she alternates from quotidian detail to romantic effusion (see Holmes, 1987:85, 94):

Travelling in Sweden is very cheap, and even commodious, if you make but the proper arrangements ...

The huge shadows of the rocks, fringed with firs, concentrating the views, without darkening them, excited that tender melancholy which, sublimating the imagination, exalts, rather than depresses the mind.

Like the novelists of the period (*vide* Ann Radcliffe) Wollstonecraft valued the effectiveness of the Shakespearean and Miltonic quotation and allusion. Inevitably Hamlet's "dull, flat and unprofitable" springs to her mind when languid and depressed in Denmark (Holmes, 1987:181).

### 3. The language of the head – the public *Letters*

To read the *Letters* is to be continually delighted by their demonstration of an unfailing curiosity, energy and intelligence, all of which result in perceptions truly illuminating of the society and the topography she observes. The tone is generally brisk and confident, the details reveal someone who is enterprising and resourceful, capable of seeking out crucial information and drawing informed conclusions and generalisations from the specifics of her observations. She is careful to present an account every bit as rational and informative as the works of travel that had preceded hers from the pen of Coxe (1784) or Boswell (1785) or Cooper (1794). "At supper my host told me bluntly that I was a woman of observation for I asked him *men's questions*" (Holmes, 1987:68). In the third *Letter*

she reveals that an intelligent responsiveness is the *raison d'être* of both travelling and journal keeping (Holmes 1987:79):

As in travelling, the keeping of a journal excites to many useful enquiries that would not have been thought of, had the traveller only determined to see all he could see, without ever asking himself for what purpose.

She points out that she will write down her observations and reflections as they arise – rather than endeavour "to arrange them" (Holmes, 1987:85). Thereby she ensures that her journal projects spontaneity and a dramatic sense of the experience of travel. Her observation that "[t]ravellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home" (Holmes, 1987:93) reveals her own robust attitude to what is "other". She is, however, not immune to the usual frustrations and irritations of travel whether they be in the form of a "churlish brute" of a postilion (Holmes, 1987:157), or "comfortless" inns (Holmes, 1987:71) with their airless rooms and over-soft duvets, getting under which she describes as like "sleeping between two down beds" (Holmes, 1987:86). Like many travelers she suffers problems of accommodation: "we were sent from house to house, and found at last a vacant room to sleep in, which I should have turned from with disgust, had there been a choice" (Holmes, 1987:189). "After a long journey, with our eyes directed to some particular spot, to arrive and find nothing as it should be, is vexatious, and sinks the agitated spirits" (Holmes, 1987:189), but these are after all "passing cares, the recollection of which afterwards enlivens our enjoyments" (Holmes, 1987:189). She is consistently fearless when faced with the exigencies of tempestuous seas, wild countryside, and lonely roads (Holmes 1987:182):

As neither I nor my little girl are ever attacked by sea sickness  
... I enter a boat with the same indifference as I change horses;  
and as for danger, come when it may, I dread it not sufficiently  
to have any anticipating fears.

Her intrepid spirit is well captured in the following little cameo: "[w]rapping my great coat around me, I lay down on some sails at the bottom of the boat" (Holmes, 1987:95).

The topics covered in the *Letters* are varied but all characteristic of the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; see Wollstonecraft, 1985). She discusses the relative states of oppression of the Swedes, Norwegians and Danes (Holmes, 1987:161, 165), the no-

ticeable effects of French revolutionary principles even in these far-flung parts (Holmes, 1987:78), the free press enjoyed in Denmark and Norway (Holmes, 1987:105), the invidious position of women (“the men stand up for the dignity of men, by oppressing the women”, Holmes, 1987:76), the plight of single mothers (Holmes, 1987:14), the inequalities of marriage where wives are “worn down by tyranny to servile submission (Holmes, 1987:161), the inadequacies of parenting (Holmes, 1987:165). She dismisses with vigour the deterrence argument as a valid one in favour of the death penalty (Holmes, 1987:168), she ponders the differing advantages of town and country life (Holmes, 1987:84), and she increasingly castigates commerce and materialism in a series of pungent metaphors – the “din of trade” (Holmes, 1987:195), the “muddy channel of business” (Holmes, 1987:195). These topics, as well as the minutiae of landscape, décor, dress, food, architecture, make every page both informative and entertaining.

#### 4. Addressing the tastes of the age

It is in her ways of seeing and talking about the landscape and her interest in the advantages and drawbacks of the imagination, and the relative value of reason and emotion, that she most clearly demonstrates the sensibilities of the age. The wild and unfamiliar coastline of Scandinavia predictably evokes the vocabulary of the sublime (cf. Holmes 1987:88):

Approaching the frontiers, consequently the sea, nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty. Still it was sublime.

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; but the eagle fixed his nest high amongst the rocks, and the vulture hovered over this abode of desolation.

The sublime is inevitably contrasted with the beautiful and the merely picturesque. Repeatedly, the aesthetic vocabulary of the period is the means of mentally and emotionally organising the landscape into one that fits a predetermined aesthetic. Factual details often give way to the contemporary terminology (Holmes, 1987:139-140):

Arriving at the ferry, the passage over to Moss is about six or eight English miles; I saw the most level shore I had yet seen in

Norway. The appearance of the circumjacent country had been preparing me for the change of scene, which was to greet me, when I reached the coast. For the grand features of nature had been dwindling into prettiness as I advanced; yet the rocks, on a smaller scale, were finely wooded to the water's edge. Little art appeared, yet sublimity every where gave place to elegance.

At other moments the raptures of sensibility are undercut by the observations of common sense: "I retired, to be lulled to sleep by the murmuring of a stream, of which I with great difficulty obtained sufficient to perform my daily ablutions" (Holmes, 1987:87). Similarly, a lapse into self-pity is halted by a robustly self-ironic awareness: "My eyes followed them [a father and daughter] to the cottage, and an involuntary sigh whispered to my heart, that I envied the mother, much as I dislike cooking, who was preparing their pottage" (Holmes, 1987:158). She also expresses the period's growing belief in the therapeutic and consolatory qualities of nature (Holmes, 1987:152-153):

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

In a text dating from 1795 it is not surprising that other favourite terms of the period – sympathy, imagination, emotion, reason – also appear frequently. Yet such terms are not merely the modish expressions of the time, for, when we look at the private letters written simultaneously, we realise that Wollstonecraft is struggling not only to control her emotions and literally maintain hold on reason, but is striving also for an understanding of the part that the emotions and the reason must play in a balanced personality. She comes to recognise that her sanity will depend on achieving that balance. She admits to being a passionate and emotional person: "I must love and admire with warmth, or I sink into sadness" (Holmes, 1987:111). She also firmly believes that "a warm heart" is not incompatible with rationality (Holmes, 1987:79, 128). Yet warmth of

emotions and imagination, which she deems desirable traits, enlarge one's capacity to feel both joy and pain and it is pain that can so easily lead one into irrational and debasing behaviour.

## 5. The language of the heart – the private letters

Janet Todd (2000:317-318) has pointed out how often Wollstonecraft punctured the “melodramatic self-consciousness” in the *Letters*. Such a mood appeared frequently in the “unrelentingly melancholy letters to Imlay”. Todd reminds us that Godwin cut the private letters to Imlay before publishing them to conceal the business transactions and “probably to make them more intense” (Todd, 2000:483, footnote 4). Yet undoubtedly in the private letters to Imlay she reveals her pain openly. We see the visible effects of this in the breakdown of syntax which conveys the deleterious effect of unrestrained emotion on one's ability to remain in control. These private letters are often brief and breathless outpourings of emotion, embarrassingly wheedling and filled with endless complaints. At their most emotional the syntax is staccato and dashes predominate (Wardle, 1979:295):

My spirits are agitated, I scarcely know why – The quitting England seems to be a fresh parting. – Surely you will not forget me. – A thousand weak forebodings assault my soul ...

Karen R. Lawrence (1994:4) has pointed out that “travel and travel writing serve as both strategies and metaphors for moving beyond the fixation of feeling”. Indeed as Wollstonecraft's journey progresses, the bracing freshness of the Scandinavian air seems to lighten the predominant misery of the private letters. This is a personal demonstration of Wollstonecraft's strongly expressed view in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that, without some kind of focus outside the self, women remain a prey to emotions to the detriment of their reason. Like men, they need pursuits that “interest the head as well as the heart” (*Vindication*: 180). Women, she knows, “have seldom sufficient serious employment to silence their feelings” (*Vindication*: 169). The exigencies of her journey and the organisation it necessarily involved must have been enormous and something of the required rigour of spirit emerges even in the most self-abasing private outpourings to Imlay. We must never forget too that Godwin's editing has perhaps had the unintended effect of making those letters seem more single-minded cries of woe than they would perhaps have been when the practicalities of her business dealings added leaven to the cries from the heart. When one juxtaposes the two sets of documents one is able to see how Wollstonecraft

carefully pruned the excessive emotional outbursts of the private letters so that her professionalism (manifest in *Letters*) emerged despite her severe depression.<sup>7</sup>

The twenty six private letters are filled with expressions of her own depression and despair (Wardle, 1979:289-316), thoughts about Fanny's future (Wardle, 1979:310, 313-314), the strains of travelling (Wardle, 1979:300), the distress of coming to terms with Imlay's cooling affections (Wardle, 1979:310), together with a few admissions that the pleasures of the landscape, the climate and the new experiences are emotionally therapeutic (Wardle, 1979:303, 307-308). Without knowledge of these letters we would have little awareness of the extent of her suffering during these four months, for her private feelings only very occasionally surface in the *Letters* and then often in a deliberately stylised way: "At present black melancholy hovers round my footsteps; and sorrow sheds a mildew over all the future prospects, which hope no longer gilds" she writes in *Letters* (Holmes, 1987:141), whereas in private she admits: "To tell you the truth, I never suffered in my life so much from depression of spirits – from despair" (Wardle, 1979:297). This ability to structure her own emotions into an attractive sensibility for the planned official publication demonstrates also her awareness of the likely demands of the book-buying public. More frequently, the private experience is only discernible in *Letters* through noting the topics she chooses to dwell upon as when she comments favourably on the French and their "virtuous enthusiasm" (Holmes, 1987:172) at almost the same time as she is privately mentioning to Imlay her plan to settle in France (Wardle, 1979:313). At crucial moments we are made to recognise the paradoxical combination of her embarrassing revelations to Imlay about the extent of her despair and, in the *Letters*, her enormous self-control as she omits or censors the rawness of emotion with a turn of phrase such as "I cannot write any more at present. Tomorrow we will talk of Tonsberg" (Holmes, 1987:100). Privately she is almost "deranged" by a fall she has on stepping ashore in Sweden (Wardle, 1979:299), but this has no place in *Letters*. Her need to leave Fanny in Sweden during her trip into Norway is related to Imlay as one more instance of her lamentable state. She writes "at night ... I asked myself how I could

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7 Although Imlay is obviously the (unnamed) addressee of *Letters*, this set was clearly shaped for Joseph Johnson's reading public. In a letter to Imlay from Tonsberg dated 18 July she tells of how she has "begun – , which will, I hope, discharge all my obligations of a pecuniary kind". Ralph M. Wardle takes this to refer to *Letters* (1979:306).

think of parting with her for ever, of leaving her thus helpless?" (Wardle, 1979:305). Here her self-pity envisages a melodramatically imagined prospect. In the fifth of the *Letters* she states matter-of-factly "not intending to make a long stay, I left my little girl behind me" (Holmes, 1987:86). Six letters to Imlay, dated from 14 July to 9 August, survive, written while in Norway. This period of just over three weeks is related in seven longish *Letters*. To Imlay she writes of Fanny's future: "I wish for us to live together, because I want you to acquire an habitual tenderness for my poor girl" (Wardle, 1979:306-307). A week later she is filled with uncertainties about a future with him and states her conviction that she can provide for Fanny herself (Wardle, 1979:309). The public *Letters* of course do not dwell on this yet her depressed moments and her concerns about Fanny do emerge. Arriving in Larvik after a sea crossing she is tired and low-spirited. The hospitality she receives arouses self-pity (Holmes, 1987:97):

The sympathy I inspired, thus dropping down from the clouds in a strange land, affected me more than it would have done, had not my spirits been harassed by various causes – by much thinking – musing almost to madness – and even by a sort of weak melancholy that hung about my heart at parting with my daughter for the first time.

This gives rise to a generalised lament "Hapless woman! What a fate is thine!" (Holmes, 1987:97). Almost at the moment she is telling Imlay about her determination to support Fanny herself (in the face of his obvious withdrawal of affection), she is noting the situation of a single mother (cf. Wardle, 1979:308-309 and Holmes, 1987:114). On departing from Tonsberg on 22 August she allows herself a paragraph in the *Letters* of excited anticipation of embracing her "Fannikin" again. She admits that she has deliberately refrained from much allusion to Fanny "whilst I was detained by business" (Holmes 1987:136). The confession that follows is delightfully self-ironic. "Yet I never saw a calf bounding in a meadow that did not remind me of my little frolicker. A calf, you say. Yes; but a *capital* one, I own" (Holmes 1987:136) Although she writes of her impatience to arrive at Gothenburg from which she had departed six weeks before, she does *not* tell of her reunion with Fanny – a deliberate decision to omit a very charged moment from the *Letters*.

Her last extant private letter to Imlay from Norway, dated 9 August, is strenuously controlled. She had obviously received a batch of five letters from him which could not have been reassuring as to their relationship. "You shall not be tormented with any more complaints. I

am disgusted with myself for having so long importuned you with my affection ... Yours sincerely, Mary" (Wardle, 1979:309). Something of that stiff upper lip appears in one of the *Letters* composed the day after leaving Christiania (Holmes, 1987:151):

How I am altered by disappointment! – When going to Lisbon, the elasticity of my mind was sufficient to ward off weariness, and my imagination still could dip her brush in the rainbow of fancy, and sketch futurity in glowing colours. Now – but let me talk of something else – will you go with me to the cascade?

Here the articulation of her grief is deliberately stylised and the final invitation is extremely effective in its tone and its choice of distraction. Who of her readers would resist walking with her to the cascade, the sublimity of which she describes in the following paragraphs?

The weeks from early September until her return to Dover on 4 October were spent in Denmark and Hamburg and the four private letters to Imlay that have survived are almost uniformly expressive of depression and exhaustion. "I see here [in Copenhagen] nothing but heaps of ruins ... I am weary of traveling [sic] ... I am strangely cast off" (Wardle, 1979:311). Or again, "No poor tempest-tossed mariner ever more earnestly longed to arrive at his port" (Wardle, 1979:314). During the month between her arrival in Denmark and her return to England one notices far more obvious cross-references between the private and the public writings. She is less able or concerned to conceal her personal feelings, and the signs of struggle to suppress the irruption of the private into the public are often manifest. Her first letter from Copenhagen to Imlay is a flood of woe: "What I have suffered this last year, is not to be forgotten! ... Why am I thus abandoned?" (Wardle, 1979:311). The opening of the public account from Copenhagen determinedly lists mere facts: "The distance from Elsinore to Copenhagen is twenty-two miles; the road is very good, over a flat country diversified with wood, mostly beech, and decent mansions" (Holmes, 1987:163). In the light of the private confessions, this reads as a strenuous attempt *not* to succumb to emotion. Yet the private begins to intrude more and more into the public persona: "my spirits ... have been growing more and more languid ever since my return to Gothenburg – you know why" (Holmes, 1987:182). Comments in the *Letters* become increasingly jaundiced and perfunctory and she admits to a lack of interest in sightseeing: "I have remained more at home, since I arrived at Copenhagen than I ought to have done in a strange place" (Holmes, 1987:180). In a private letter from Copenhagen she expresses the

*ennui* more forcefully: "I see here nothing but heaps of ruins, and only converse with people immersed in trade and sensuality" (Wardle, 1979:311). Such dismissal of business people is a theme that surfaces increasingly in *Letters*. Her oft-expressed disgust with business, materialism, commerce seems to be a way of expressing her disenchantment with Imlay's interests, her awareness of her degrading enmeshment in his commercial projects, her sense of being used and abused by him in the interests of his financial well-being. In the *Letters* from Hamburg in late September, the months of effortful travelling lead her to more open comments on Imlay. At first her comments on his perceived devaluing of her own sensibilities and her contrary judgement on his materialism are oblique but they now become surprisingly open (cf. Holmes, 1987:191):

... men entirely devoted to commerce never acquire, or lose, all taste and greatness of mind. An ostentatious display of wealth without elegance, and a greedy enjoyment of pleasure without sentiment, embrates them till they term all virtue, of an heroic cast, romantic attempts at something above our nature; and anxiety about the welfare of others, a search after misery, in which we have no concern. But you will say that I am growing bitter, perhaps, personal. Ah! Shall I whisper to you – that you – yourself, are strangely altered, since you have entered deeply into commerce – more than you are aware of – .

Emotionally and physically exhausted she lands at Dover. The "tempest-tossed mariner" who has "longed to arrive at [her] port" (Wardle, 1979:314) is now devoid of energy and curiosity. This mood cannot any more be concealed in the public account: "I do not feel inclined to ramble any farther this year ... My spirit of observation seems to be fled – and I have been wandering round this dirty place, literally speaking, to kill time" (Holmes, 1987:197). These last words are written under the heading *Dover*. Her private letter to Imlay from Dover is both distressing and embarrassing. "I now earnestly intreat you to write to me, without fail, by the return of post ... Do not keep me in suspense ... My die is cast ... I am unable to tear up by the roots the propensity to affection which has been the torment of my life – but life will have an end!" (Wardle, 1979:316). These words to Imlay barely conceal a seeming awareness of the reality of their failed relationship. Her farewell in the last words of the *Letters* is however beautifully controlled (cf. Holmes, 1987:197):

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! Mary.

The effort to cling on to her hard-won sense of independence is to prove too much and the second attempt at suicide occurs six days later. Yet it is perhaps also significant that, when published, the *Letters* concluded, not with the world-weary comment about merely killing time but with an *Appendix* and *Two Notes*. In the *Appendix* she ponders on the likely amelioration of conditions throughout Europe to be gained not by means of violent change but by "ripening understanding" (Holmes, 1987:198). The two *Supplementary Notes* itemize, with exemplary meticulousness, some statistics relative to the countries she has visited.

## 6. Reason and feeling – a fragile peace

What do we learn about Mary Wollstonecraft from a reading of both sets of documents? Claire Tomalin tells of how when Wollstonecraft was pregnant with Fanny during late 1793 and early 1794 she worked on *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. She and Imlay were apart for much of that time. Tomalin (1977:210-211) comments:

The steady effort to keep thinking and writing was the more impressive when set beside her letters to Imlay, which show her as a creature almost entirely at the mercy of emotional impulse.

The same contrast can be seen when juxtaposing the private and public letters from Scandinavia. Yet, there is perhaps an important difference, for the very nature of travel brings with it a sense of progression and, besides the intrinsic distractions of visiting new places, one senses a growth in self-awareness aided presumably by the solitary nature of that journeying. Wollstonecraft writes (see Holmes, 1987:122):

What a long time it requires to know ourselves; and yet almost every one has more of this knowledge than he is willing to own, even to himself. I cannot immediately determine whether I ought to rejoice at having turned over in this solitude a new page in the history of my own heart ...

The private letters to Imlay, mawkish and plaintive as they often are, do emerge from the pen of one enduring the trials of enforced independence, while the public *Letters* reveal a deliberate composing of the self as Wollstonecraft organises both her itinerary and her account of it. Indeed she quite deliberately undertook the *Letters*

as the means of gaining financial independence from Imlay. This is ironical indeed as she had undertaken the business commission on his behalf. By choosing the letter form she could combine subjective comment, personal revelation, and even emotional outburst so that the *Letters* openly reveal passion and sensitivity as well as factual information. Likewise the private, highly emotional letters to Imlay are touched here and there with the psychological benefits accruing from her adventurous journeying.

Both sets of documents reveal the tug of war between reason and feeling that Wollstonecraft recognized as that which characterises the personality. She knew by experience that women are prone to indulge their emotions – primarily because of their narrow lives, their parlous education, and the expectations of society. She knew too how important it was for women to flout those expectations and not be seen to indulge their emotions. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she had overemphasised the need to be rational rather than emotional as a reaction against the stereotype of the female.<sup>8</sup> It would seem that whereas the *Vindication* exhibits the strictures of the theorist, the journey to Scandinavia three years later reveals someone who has fully lived in the world. By 1795 she had experienced both the advantages and disadvantages of sexual passion, had become responsible for another (her daughter) and had recognised that the emotions have a vital part to play in the human personality. In her account of her journey to Scandinavia she chose the epistolary form which enabled her to combine documentary travelogue with the presentation of the feeling subject experiencing the journey. The form itself admits of both fact and feeling, reason and emotion. She openly admits: “my very reason obliges me to permit my feelings to be my criterion” (Holmes, 1987:123). She is confident enough to give “the indulgence of feeling the sanction of reason” (Holmes, 1987:129). Often she admits that her imagination hurries her forward while reason drags her back (Holmes, 1987:149). Abandoning the role of stern preceptor of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she openly acknowledges that women “reason deeply when we forcibly feel” (Holmes, 1987:171). Perhaps it is this insight and its vivid demonstration that most characterises the material which emanated for this journey. Despite the despair, the anguish, besides the self-flagellation, the demeaning pleas evident in her private letters, she

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8 See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* chapter 2 (Wollstonecraft, 1985 [1792]).

has, in the carefully worked *Letters*, forged the ideal union of feeling and reason. The glimpses of her heartache serve to add to the appeal of the account and the experiencing self is mirrored in a landscape that arouses the passions and the feelings as it necessitates an exceptional amount of detailed planning and organisation. The journey is a journey of discovery through a landscape that literally depicts the wasteland of emotions, the terrors of loneliness and the sublimity of achievement. Having successfully negotiated her business journey, she also successfully transformed her experiences into a publication which won her both financial rewards and respectful recognition. She had written that there is a danger, given the focus women place on their emotional lives, that "sentiments become events" (*Vindication*: 306) which leads women "to neglect the duties of life" (*Vindication*: 306). One of these duties, she argues, should be the earning of their own subsistence "the true definition of independence" (*Vindication*: 182). She thereby demonstrated in her own life the possibility of a woman attaining a measure of emotional and financial independence – the ideal aim specified in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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