

The Moral Imagination and Sympathetic Engagement:

The Power of Affect in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction*

by

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## Abstract

This study, which is founded on an assumption of the unity of aesthetics and ethics, illustrates the reformative power of the moral imagination and sympathetic engagement in Mary Wollstonecraft's first novella, *Mary, A Fiction*. Sympathy—wakened by the literary imagination and invoking the reader's moral potentiality—is what links the literary and the ethical; the emotional exchange, the sympathetic fusion, that occurs between reader and text may extend beyond the pages of the novella into the real world. The affective experience of reading literature, which allows for imaginative perspective-taking, moves us to act in ways that make us more social, more resistant to injustice, and better equipped to enact necessary change. This study delineates the three-fold operation of imagination, sympathy, and affect in Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, which extols a heroine who exemplifies the radicalizing power of affect and which itself has the power to effect a revolution in its readers.

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## Dedication

For my parents, Penny Jones Square and David Square.

“Perhaps he was a fool, but he thought that if a work were truly great you would only have to read it once and you would be stolen from yourself, desperately moved, changed forever.”

Mark Helprin, *A Soldier of the Great War*

“The shelf was filled with books . . . that could . . . remake one’s soul.”

Mark Helprin, *Winter’s Tale*

“Words were all he knew; they possessed and overwhelmed him,  
as if they were a thousand white cats  
with whom he shared a one-room apartment.”

Mark Helprin, *Winter’s Tale*

## Introduction

### **Revolution, Radicalism, and Rights:**

### **Progressivist Politics and Reformative Fiction in the Romantic Era**

The novelist is a political artist, a member of the revolutionary vanguard able to politicize ‘the grosser and more insensible part of mankind’, thereby effecting a non-violent, intellectual, moral and cultural revolution – a reading revolution.<sup>1</sup>

—Gary Kelly

[Mary Wollstonecraft] is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living.<sup>2</sup>

—Virginia Woolf

“It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost dignity – and make them . . . labour by reforming themselves to reform the world,” asserts the radical feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in her political treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) (158). It is by means of the literary imagination, by means of an “inner,” “reading revolution,” that Wollstonecraft seeks to achieve her actual “revolution in female manners,” which would emancipate women from “the tyranny of man” and educate them to become “rational creatures” and thus “free citizens,” “moral agents” whose newfound “private virtue” might be translated into “public benefit” (Kelly, *Revolutionary* 223, Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 342, 323, 287). In first turning to the literary form in *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) to articulate the political arguments she would later advance in her polemical works—*A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)—Wollstonecraft

reveals her preference for literature and its ability to cultivate ethical awareness and convey moral truths through the evocation of emotion and the illuminating power of the imagination. Indeed, Wollstonecraft's two novellas, *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), are "the very bookends of [her] life as a writer"—commencing and concluding her writing career—which suggests that Wollstonecraft considered imaginative literature a more powerful vehicle than polemical prose for disseminating her political agenda (Johnson, "Wollstonecraft's novels" 190). Literary imagining, which appeals to our rich inner worlds, takes us back to our capacities as human beings, inspiring us to contemplate our own possibilities, to develop our sympathy through imaginative perspective-taking, and to envision a more just society. Through affective aesthetics, then, Wollstonecraft transmits her deeply felt convictions to her readers—whether her present or future readers—encouraging them to feel what she feels through the literary imagination, which fosters sympathetic engagement and thereby expands our scope of ethical consideration. The moral machinery of the imagination allows for a sympathetic leap between self and other, enabling an empathic experience of another's perspective, and thereby facilitating ethical insight. As the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) would say—as expressed in his highly influential *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)—it is "by the imagination only that we can form any conception of" another's "sensations" (3). And this sympathetic synthesis between self and other achieved through the moral imagination is possessed of profound reformatory potentialities.

When we read literature, our sympathy is engaged, our experience enlarged, and by feeling, we become other-oriented, linked through what Raimond Gaita calls our "common humanity." Moreover, the fellow-feeling fostered by the literary imagination might transcend the textual frame and extend to real-world relations, thereby advancing the common good. As the

Victorian novelist George Eliot (1819-1880) writes in her “Natural History of German Life” (1856):

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. . . . Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. (54)

Thus, sympathy for the inhabitants of a story world might translate into sympathy for individuals in one’s own world; a reader’s sympathy for a character suffering injustice might be transferred to a human being suffering similar injustice in the real world. Conscious of this critical correlation between textual sympathy and actual sympathy, between the creative imagination and social and political actuality, Wollstonecraft utilizes the affective force of the fictional form in *Mary* to encourage a reformative reading, whereby the reader participates in her progressive feminist project, becoming a co-creator of change. According to Wollstonecraft, then, ““the personal is the political”” (Kelly, “Introduction” ix).<sup>3</sup> Each individual has the potential to create change through an internal revolution—sparked by the literary imagination, which cultivates sympathy and encourages self-reflection and connection-making between the fictional world and the real world—and these private “[u]pheavals of thought” might inspire actual social and political upheavals, real-world transformative action (Nussbaum, *Upheavals*).

Wollstonecraft's recognition of literature's capacity to cultivate the imagination and so stimulate sympathy aligns her with Smith, whose *Moral Sentiments* advances sympathy—ignited by the creative imagination—as the source of social unity and morality. An honourable mention in Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, Smith was “an important source for Wollstonecraft’s Sentimental social theories” (Kelly, *Revolutionary* 166). His *Moral Sentiments* provided her “with a philosophy of moral self-consciousness, ethical conduct, [and] social sympathy” (Kelly, “Introduction” xiii). In fact, Smith is one amidst a group of eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), and David Hume (1711-1776), who single out sympathy as a crucial cohesive force in society, and whose theories would likely have been circulated amongst Romantic-era writers through the radical publisher Joseph Johnson—Wollstonecraft’s publisher—and his famous literary circle, which included such writers as “Tom Paine, William Blake, William Godwin, Dr Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, George Dyer, Mary Hays, Anna Barbauld, Erasmus Darwin, John Horne Tooke, Joseph Cartwright, William Beckford, Henry Fuseli,” William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Wollstonecraft (White 39). Wollstonecraft’s Smithian sympathies—her recognition that sympathy serves a vital social function—are striking and effectively employed in *Mary*, in which she seeks to translate novelistic sympathy, or readerly affect, into prosocial action. Through *Mary*, Wollstonecraft educates her readers in her own feminist politics, and by means of the sympathy-inspiring reading experience, by means of the creative imagination, Wollstonecraft aims to radicalize her readers and thereby mobilize them towards ethical action.

The affective aesthetics of sensibility—a word that will be used synonymously with “sentiment”—provide yet another avenue whereby Wollstonecraft invokes a radical movement

towards social and political change in the reading public.<sup>4</sup> Animated by a spirit of reform, sensibility—an eighteenth-century cultural and literary phenomenon influenced by the Moral Sense philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment—stresses the fundamentality of human benevolence and sympathy, reacting against Thomas Hobbes's contention—as delineated in his *Leviathan* (1651)—that humanity is inherently self-interested. Yet, Wollstonecraft is conscious of sensibility's "Janus-face," its espousal of social-consciousness and sympathy on the one hand, and its encouragement of self-indulgent emotion and affected behaviour on the other (Csengei 30). As Jane Stabler comments, "[n]o one could say for certain whether sensibility would lead to greater social connection or solipsism" (30). Moreover, sensibility had a particularly pernicious effect on women, for it extols feminine delicacy and weakness, emotional sensitivity and vulnerability, a problem magnified by the sentimental novel's representation and perverse celebration of this debilitating ideal of womanhood. And because women were the most avid readers of novels of sensibility, this literary form played a central role in the cultural construction of women's character, a problem Wollstonecraft recognized and sought to remedy.

To counter the deleterious influence of the sentimental novel, its capacity to creep into female consciousness and form women's character, Wollstonecraft develops her own reformatory version of sensibility, one interfused with and invigorated by her feminist politics and her Smithian-inspired vision of social sympathy. Moreover, because reason is the touchstone of Wollstonecraft's philosophy—the foundation, for her, of a just and humane society—she incorporates it into her radicalized version of sensibility, creating a socially transformative, twofold sensibility of emotion and reason, sympathetic feeling and rational intellect, to counter the conventional two-faced sensibility of affect and affectation. Thus, by means of her revitalized aesthetic of sensibility, Wollstonecraft seeks to re-form the female mind. Because "it was

through writing in particular . . . that women internalized their own subjection, it was through writing that Wollstonecraft” challenged “the social and cultural order oppressing women” (Kelly, *Revolutionary* vi). Thus, “Wollstonecraft’s Revolutionary feminism,” argues Gary Kelly, “was a writing revolution, exemplified and conducted in writing” (1). Wollstonecraft therefore aims to re-form and radicalize her readers through the written word.

This radicalization of the reading public was a concept familiar to the Romantic era (1780-1832), which was marked by the mayhem of violent revolution and political upheaval. A turbulent and progressive period of radical reform and cataclysmic change, the Romantic era is frequently referred to as ““the age of revolution”” (Bainbridge 15). British consciousness was saturated by revolutionary events, the American Revolution (1775-1783) a recent memory and the French Revolution a present crisis, erupting in 1789. While British conservatives condemned the revolution in France and feared that its ideals of egalitarianism and democracy might contaminate the minds of British citizens, liberals such as Wollstonecraft, the young Wordsworth (1770-1850), and other radical Romantic-era writers “welcomed the early phase as a repetition of England’s ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688,” “enflamed with [the] hope” that this revolutionary fervour might spread to Britain (Wolfson and Manning 10-11, Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 10.38). Wordsworth’s early exuberant faith in the Revolution is conveyed in his enthusiastic cry, “O pleasant exercise of hope and joy! . . . Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!” (*Prelude* 10.689-92). For Wordsworth, the French Revolution was a way for him and others to serve humankind, since it allowed people to “exercise their skill / Not in Utopia . . . But in the very world” (10.722-26). In its initial stages, then, the Revolution held the promise of positive transformation, of political freedom and social equality, bringing about an “irrevocable

tide of new ideas” rising “against seemingly entrenched structures” and inspiring impassioned debates about human rights (Wolfson and Manning 3).

The revolution in France therefore resonated with the radical and libertarian philosophies of many British Romantic-era writers, who seized the revolutionary moment as an opportunity to voice their discontent and propagate their reformative agendas. Indeed, as R.S. White notes, “[n]ovelists and poets were at the centre of the assertion of rights and ‘the dignity of human nature’” (6). “They were the ones,” White argues, “who could carry the vocabulary and concepts of rights into the popular consciousness, and move hearts and minds to identify both emotionally and rationally with their cause” (6). Virginia Woolf captures the radical writer Wollstonecraft’s fascination with the French Revolution and its profoundly personal effect on her life and writings: the Revolution “was not merely an event that had happened outside her,” Woolf writes, “it was an active agent in her own blood” (473). Having “been in revolt all her life – against tyranny, against law, against convention,” Wollstonecraft sympathized with the Revolution and its ideals, which “expressed some of her deepest theories and convictions” (473). Thus, when the reformed Whig-turned-conservative Edmund Burke published his vehement attack on the French Revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Wollstonecraft responded swiftly and impressively with her *Rights of Men* (1790), published only three weeks later by Johnson (Mellor 5).

In fact, as Simon Bainbridge elucidates, “Burke’s conservative arguments and his attack on the revolution provoked over one hundred responses in favour of the events in France and the possibilities of political change,” of which Wollstonecraft’s was the first (17). The most famous of these responses, however, was Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791), which, as Bainbridge notes, “ridiculed Burke’s melodramatic descriptions of the revolution, defended the concept of

the natural rights of man, and asserted the prerogative of the living to change their forms of government" (17). White comments that Paine's *Rights of Man* "politicised and radicalised a whole class which would press harder and harder for the rights he demanded on their behalf" (90). Wollstonecraft was at the center of this far-reaching debate on human rights. As Wollstonecraft's radical husband William Godwin writes in his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—which he published after her death in 1798—"a three-cornered battle" erupted between "Mary's friend Dr. Richard Price, Edmund Burke and Mary herself" (193). Price—a liberal-minded Presbyterian minister—was, Godwin notes, "the originator of the trouble," for it was Price's *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, delivered on November 4, 1789 and celebrating the French Revolution, that provoked Burke's reactionary response (193).

While Price praised the French Revolution and emphasized its "global significance," the apologist Burke condemned it as an affront to civilization, to the culture of propriety and manners he so valued; as Burke laments in his typically melodramatic language, "the age of chivalry is gone" (Macdonald and Scherf 9, Burke 375). According to Burke, the onslaught of the Revolution was "the most horrid, atrocious, and afflicting spectacle, that perhaps ever was exhibited to the pity and indignation of mankind"; it represented, for him, the demoralization and degeneration of civilized society (371). As Claudia L. Johnson writes, Burke "regarded the calamity of the revolution in France as a crisis of sentiment, and this in turn . . . as a crisis of gender" (*Equivocal* 3). In a superlatively sentimental passage, which is commonplace in Burke's *Reflections*, he mourns the death of chivalry, that sexist idolatry of the female sex: "Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart. . . . It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity

of honour" (375). Thus, arguing in favour of rank, social distinction, sexism, prejudice, and political conservatism, it is not surprising that Burke's *Reflections* incited Wollstonecraft's indignation and prompted her precipitous response in *Rights of Men*, which, as Macdonald and Scherf note, is also, "in part, a vindication of Richard Price," for whom Wollstonecraft held great respect (9). As Godwin states in his *Memoirs*: "the regard conceived by" Wollstonecraft and Price when they met at Newington Green in 1793 "was mutual, and partook of a spirit of the purest attachment" (27). Wollstonecraft therefore utilizes Price's moralistic and libertarian vocabulary in her *Rights of Men*, advocating for "truth," "virtue," "liberty," and that "universal benevolence" preached by Price in his *Discourse* (Price 357).

Like Price, then—who proclaims that "the ardor for liberty [is] catching and spreading"—Wollstonecraft praises the ideals of the French Revolution and asserts "the rights of humanity" (Price 359, Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men* 35). In powerful polemical prose, Wollstonecraft rebukes Burke and expresses her abhorrence of his reactionary politics, ostentatious style, and overblown, "infantile sensibility" (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men* 96).<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, she calls for a radical reformation of society, one that would embrace egalitarian values and recognize the supremacy of reason over sentimentality, for, according to Wollstonecraft, Burke's "pampered sensibility" has rendered him effeminate—to use a problematic Wollstonecraftian word—and "dispel[led] the sober suggestions of [his] reason," that preeminent faculty that raises humankind above "the brute creation" (*Rights of Men* 37, *Rights of Woman* 117).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Johnson writes, "[w]hereas Burke had accounted for the political crisis in France at least in part by postulating the ascendancy of monstrously coldhearted men, Wollstonecraft maintains conversely that society is being undermined by feminized, sentimental men" (*Equivocal* 7). Importantly, although Wollstonecraft's life and writings were

influenced and informed by the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility (to be discussed in detail in Chapter Two), she was acutely aware of its two-facedness: its affected and false form of exaggerated emotion and melodrama—which Wollstonecraft sees as detrimental to society, and to women in particular—on the one hand, and its genuinely sympathetic form—advancing sympathy as a crucial connective force in society—on the other. Wollstonecraft therefore develops her own re-formed version of sensibility that embodies both emotion and reason and that encompasses a vision of social sympathy based on the Moral Sense philosophy of such Scottish Enlightenment thinkers as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith. Thus, for Wollstonecraft, affected sentimentality, artificial propriety, and effeminate deference to rank and nobility—as epitomized by Burke—do not civilize society but weaken and degrade it, as they have women. Like Price, Wollstonecraft advocates for genuine benevolence, personal liberty, and the cultivation of a reasoned citizenry in advancing the rights of humanity.

Indeed, according to Wollstonecraft, it is only through reason that society may be enlightened and reformed and, as she asserts in *Rights of Woman*, it is only through reason that woman—currently “a kind of subordinated” being, not “a part of the human species”—may be liberated from “the galling yoke of sovereign man” (109-110, 145). This argument echoes Price, who states in his *Discourse*—in reference to man—that “[i]gnorance is the parent of bigotry, intolerance, persecution and slavery,” concluding: “Inform and instruct mankind; and these evils will be excluded” (360). Wollstonecraft similarly contends that reason is a moralizing and liberating agent, for it is the mother of virtue, which is the wellspring of humanity. In pointing out Burke’s “mortal antipathy to reason” and ridiculing his overtly and overly sentimental disposition, then, Wollstonecraft is simultaneously underscoring his lack of virtue and his “manacle[d]” mind (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men* 38, Blake, “London” 179). Wollstonecraft

would agree with Price that “[t]he noblest principle in our nature is the regard to general justice, and that good-will which embraces all the world,” and Burke, devoid of reason, his mind shackled and his judgment clouded by his regard for rank and the artifices of sensibility, is bereft of this noble principle (Price 359).

Thus, having established Burke’s irrationality—which, for Wollstonecraft goes hand in hand with his moral deficiency—Wollstonecraft goes on to condemn the conservative’s selfish resistance to political reform, asserting the illogicality of remaining in cautious “frozen inactivity” out of a “fear of risking any personal present convenience” (38). “The rich and the weak,” writes Wollstonecraft, “will certainly applaud your system, and loudly celebrate your pious reverence for authority and establishments – they find it pleasanter to enjoy than to think; to justify oppression than correct abuses” (88). However, those, like Wollstonecraft, who “reverence” “the rights of humanity” and strive for equality, will inevitably revile and reject Burke’s unjust system, Wollstonecraft claims (35). Denouncing social rank and distinctions, “hereditary property” and “hereditary honours,” Wollstonecraft maintains that Burke’s “respect for rank has swallowed up [his] common feelings of humanity” (39). She censures Burke and his fellow conservatives and privileged peers for “consider[ing] the poor as only the live stock of an estate, the feather of hereditary nobility” (47). According to Wollstonecraft, the “respect paid to rank and fortune damps every generous purpose of the soul, and stifles the natural affections on which human contentment ought to be built” (56). She therefore asserts that this servile obeisance to rank be replaced by a respect for merit based on reason and virtue, two primary terms in the Wollstonecraftian vocabulary.

Thus, Wollstonecraft seeks to substitute democratic, egalitarian, and Enlightenment values for Burke’s exclusionary and privilege-based values. She affirms the equal and natural

“rights of humanity” in opposition to Burke’s claim to the unequal and unnatural rights of the rich, echoing Price’s claim that contemporary governments “are usurpations on the rights of men, and little better than contrivances for enabling the *few* to oppress the *many*” (360). Defending the rights of the poor, Wollstonecraft addresses and skilfully admonishes Burke: “It is, Sir, possible to render the poor happier in this world, without depriving them of the consolation which you gratuitously grant them in the next” (92). The poor “have a right,” Wollstonecraft continues, “to more comfort than they at present enjoy; and more comfort might be afforded them, without encroaching on the pleasures of the rich: not now waiting to enquire whether the rich have a right to exclusive pleasures” (92). Thus, as Michelle Faubert succinctly states, Wollstonecraft “denies that the class system reflects a natural hierarchy of people that justly establishes some people as leaders of others” (“Introduction” 12). According to Wollstonecraft, then, inequality breeds tyranny and affected servility. It is only by means of an egalitarian society—in which reason is cultivated through equal education—that virtue may flourish.

Two years later, having proven her polemical proficiency in *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft would apply these democratic and Enlightenment principles to women in particular in her educational feminist treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a response to Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord’s *Rapport sur L’instruction Publique*, which he presented to the National Assembly in September 1791 (Macdonald and Scherf 11). Addressing Talleyrand-Perigord directly, Wollstonecraft writes: “I dedicate this volume to you; and induce you to reconsider the subject [of education], and maturely weigh what I have advanced respecting the rights of woman and national education. . . . I plead for my sex” (101). According to Talleyrand-Perigord, women’s “lot should be only domestic happiness and the

duties of the inner life,” and “they must [therefore] be formed early to fulfill this destiny,” an argument that the Swiss writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)—whom Wollstonecraft also reprimands in *Rights of Woman*—would strongly endorse (396). Indeed, Rousseau’s *Emile, ou de L ’education* (1762)—which, as White notes, “is like a pedagogical manual of the best way to educate a child up to manhood”—provided the essential basis for this line of thinking that excludes women from the educational and public sphere and relegates them to the private domain of domesticity (83).

Mirroring Rousseau in his thoughts on women’s role and place in society, Talleyrand-Perigord proclaims that “[i]f the exclusion from public office pronounced against women is a means for both sexes to increase the sum of their mutual happiness, then it is a law which all Societies have had to acknowledge and sanction” (396). He maintains that it is “incontestable . . . that the common happiness, especially that of women, requires that they do not aspire to the exercise of political rights and duties” (397). Talleyrand-Perigord asks: “Is it not obvious that [women’s] delicate constitution, their peaceful inclinations, the numerous duties of maternity, constantly estrange them from vigorous practices, from painful duties, and call them to gentle occupations, to domestic cares?” (397). Again, Talleyrand-Perigord here echoes Rousseau, who, as Wollstonecraft notes, aims to “prove that woman ought to be weak and passive, because she has less bodily strength than man” (*Rights of Woman* 198). Also like Rousseau, Talleyrand-Perigord insists that women are by nature delicate and therefore designed for domesticity, while men are, by nature, strong and thus ordained for public life. “Men,” Talleyrand-Perigord contends, “are destined to live on the stage of the world. A public education suits them. . . . The paternal home is better for the education of women; they have less need to learn to deal with the interests of others, than to accustom themselves to a calm and secluded life” (398). The fierce

essentialism and sexism of Talleyrand-Perigord's *Rapport* rightly aroused Wollstonecraft to fury and indignation. Her adept feminist response in *Rights of Woman* counters his essentialist philosophy with her own philosophy of cultural formation. According to Wollstonecraft, the environment, not nature, is the cause of women's perceived delicacy and intellectual inferiority. Women are not born inferior but are bred to be so.

As Faubert writes, Wollstonecraft demonstrates "how women are formed—and [therefore] may be reformed—by culture" ("Introduction" 12). In other words, education gives the "appearance of weakness to females" (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 131, my emphasis). Reform women's education and women themselves will be reformed. According to Wollstonecraft, then, if women were allowed "to share the advantages of education and government with man," they would "grow wiser and become free" (310). Women's weakness and inferiority are simply the inevitable outcome of "the tyranny of man" (342). Female folly, Wollstonecraft recognizes, "is produced by oppression" (342). Educated only in those female accomplishments that prepare them for the marriage market—such as dancing, drawing, and singing—women have not been taught to think; their minds, Wollstonecraft maintains, are uncultivated. Thus, denied a proper education, "it is unreasonable, as well as cruel," Wollstonecraft argues, "to upbraid [women] with faults that can scarcely be avoided" (246). Liberate woman, teach her to exercise her reason, and she will become a rational being, equal to, rather than subjected by, man. Without equality between the sexes, Wollstonecraft asserts, "morality will never gain ground," for subjugation "degrad[es] the master and the abject dependent" (278, 103). As dependent beings deprived of an education, women lack knowledge, and as Wollstonecraft contends, "[w]ithout knowledge there can be no morality!" (179). Thus, according to Wollstonecraft, "it is not empire" that women "should contend for," "but equality,"

for an equal society will produce virtuous citizens (229). Virtue is a key word in the Wollstonecraftian lexicon, and it is connected to another, equally important term, sympathy. Although Wollstonecraft is critical of certain aspects of sensibility that degrade women—such as its emphasis on exaggerated or affected emotion—she also recognizes the benefits of its espousal of human benevolence and social sympathy, which, like reason and liberty, are essential to the formation of a virtuous citizenry.

Wollstonecraft's insistence in *Rights of Woman* that education cultivates virtuous citizens, or “moral agents,” her belief that “private virtue” might, and should, be translated into “public benefit,” has been recast by the political philosopher and virtue ethicist Martha Nussbaum in our contemporary setting, for Nussbaum maintains that an education in the humanities produces good citizens of the world (287). Both Wollstonecraft and Nussbaum single out education as crucial to the creation of a humane citizenship. According to Wollstonecraft, education “strengthen[s]” and “enlarg[es]” the mind and cultivates virtue, and similarly, according to Nussbaum, it expands the individual’s sphere of moral concern, fostering sympathy and humanity (133). Both the Romantic feminist and the contemporary virtue ethicist recognize the instrumentality of education in developing a just citizenry. Therefore, that Wollstonecraft’s arguments in *Rights of Woman* are as vital today as they were in the Romantic era speaks to the enduring power of her writings. And by fictionalizing her political arguments in her two novellas, *Mary* and *Maria*—*Mary* providing a prelude to her two *Vindications*, and *Maria* an epilogue—Wollstonecraft redoubles her influence and lasting legacy. Wollstonecraft’s fiction is indeed an example of what Sophia A. McClenen and Joseph R. Slaughter refer to as art that “grapples with the urgent need to speak to the present in a moment of crisis and the desire to speak of the past to perpetuity” (9). By means of affective aesthetics, Wollstonecraft conveys her

reformative vision to her readers—whether her present or future readers—encouraging an emotive, felt, and sympathetic response to a fictional world that puts forth her feminist and educational agenda. As Arnold Weinstein asserts, when we read “we are there, on the inside,” for the sympathetic imagination allows us to transcend the boundaries between self and other and become immersed in the inner experience of another (*Recovering* 471). Through textuality, then, Wollstonecraft aspires to make her reformative vision a reality. By means of the participatory imagination, which allows for a sympathetic reciprocity between reader and text, accentuating affect and cultivating compassionate concern, Wollstonecraft orients her readers towards ethical action in the real world.

This notion that literature—which fosters sympathy and affect through the exercise of the moral imagination—holds democratizing and ethicizing potentialities has been resurrected and renewed by contemporary virtue ethicists, literary and cultural theorists, psychologists, and sociologists. My study will contribute to current research on narrative affect and social sympathy by pointing to Wollstonecraft’s formative influence on contemporary conceptualizations of the ethical and political potential of the literary imagination. Wollstonecraft’s incorporation of the Moral Sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment in her thought and writings breaks new ground, providing a valuable model for how we might utilize the affective power of literature to advance human rights. I aim to illustrate the enduring efficacy of literature and the vital role it still plays in shaping and enriching consciousness and in bringing about significant societal transformations, even in an age of poststructuralist nihilism that has licensed a radical contingency of meaning and a denial of authorial intention. Ultimately, my study aspires to encourage a rediscovery of the marvel of meaning and, in the words of Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, to “redeem the study of literature as an activity worth pursuing in its own right” (13).

Drawing on the work of contemporary philosophers, critical theorists, social psychologists, and sociologists, then, I will consider various arguments that both complement and diverge from my claim that textual sympathy has real-world implications.

Nussbaum's work on the democratizing power of the humanities, her contention that the humanities educate individuals "to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy," chimes with my assertion that the sympathetic imagination possesses profound moralizing potentialities (*Profit* 143). It is important to clarify that my use of the term "moralizing" does not imply that the reader should be instructed in, or indoctrinated into, a new set of morals, for, as Faubert rightly noted at the symposium of "The Affect Project," entitled "Expressing Emotion," "the reader might take offense to this idea of 'moralizing' and resist the implication that she should be taught new morals by fiction." Citing John Keats, who argues in a letter to his friend John Reynolds in 1818 that "[w]e hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us," that is, poetry that aims "to improve us morally, socially and politically," Faubert warns of possible resistance or even hostility to the notion that literature should improve us in some way (Keats, *Letters* 224, Faubert, *Rhyming* 206). However, in arguing for literature's moralizing potentialities, I am not suggesting that literature should *seek* to improve its readers, or that it should be used as a tyrannical tool to force the reader into self-improvement or agreement with its moral principles, but that it *naturally* encourages self-reflection and connection-making between the story world and the reader's own world. Thus, the sympathy sparked by the literary imagination may translate into sympathy for individuals within the real world, thereby expanding the reader's circle of moral consideration. It is therefore not that literature *tells* the reader what to think and how to act, but that it fosters

critical thinking, promotes self-scrutiny, and, *may* inspire benevolent behaviour or ethical conduct.

In *Human Rights of Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004), the contemporary critical theorists Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith similarly argue that literature advances human rights and social justice, arguing for the political effectiveness of storytelling, its ability to instigate real-world altruism. According to Schaffer and Smith, stories “put a human face to suffering” and encourage the reader or listener of the story to bear witness (4). This “[e]thics of [r]ecognition” may lead to action addressing the suffering. Schaffer and Smith therefore maintain that literature is an important tool for social and political change, for it points to human rights violations and inspires actual ethical response. The psychological perspective provided by C. Daniel Batson and Laura L. Shaw’s “Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives” (1991) relates to this notion that the sympathy sparked by story encourages real-world ethical action, for Batson’s “empathy-altruism hypothesis” suggests that “empathy evokes altruistic motivation” (112). This hypothesis, which argues for the ethical efficacy of emotion, will be instrumental in illustrating that the sympathy elicited by the literary imagination may extend into the real world. Kyle Irwin, Tucker McGrimmon, and Brent Simpson’s argument in “Sympathy and the Social Order” (2008) that sympathy fosters social connectivity and cooperation hearkens back to the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers’ contention that sympathy is the foundation of a humane society, therefore linking their contemporary sociological study to Wollstonecraft, whose theories and writings are influenced by the eighteenth-century Moral Sense thinkers’ philosophy of social sympathy. Irwin *et al.*’s study, then, will be particularly useful in providing a context for an analysis of the affective force of Wollstonecraft’s fiction.

While much contemporary work has been done on the social and political effectiveness of literature, its capacity to cultivate sympathy and thereby motivate actual ethical response, the literary theorist Suzanne Keen makes the important point that “many readers experience narrative empathy *without* undertaking prosocial action in the real world,” an astute and persuasive counter-argument that also requires consideration, for it poses a difficult challenge to those arguing for the affective and ethicizing power of literature (“Temperaments” 297, my emphasis). Keen’s skepticism occasions crucial questions that must be addressed in a study that advances the creative imagination as a vehicle for actual ethical response, to be discussed in the next chapter. These contemporary cross-disciplinary discussions on the imagination, sympathy, and narrative affect have significant Romantic resonances. An examination of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of these terms will make clear the formative influence Romanticism, and Wollstonecraft in particular, has had on contemporary considerations of the interconnectivity between the literary and the ethical.

According to the eighteenth-century moral philosopher Smith, as expressed in his *Moral Sentiments*, the imagination is a moralizing faculty that fosters and cultivates sympathy. “[B]y the imagination,” Smith writes, “we place ourselves in [another’s] situation . . . we enter as it were into [another’s] body, and become in some measure the same person” (3). “By changing places in fancy with the sufferer,” he continues, we are “affected by what he feels” (4). Sympathy, then, is a prosocial, other-regarding emotion that has the potential to inspire altruistic action. And it is through literature, which exercises the moral imagination, that our sympathetic capacities are most intensely engaged, thereby encouraging ethical response. While it was a commonly held belief in the Romantic era that literature served an important social function—although, as Faubert notes, Lord Byron and Keats were exceptions to this view—our

contemporary world, influenced by Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and Roland Barthes' "death of the author," considers this understanding of literature as morally enriching and socially useful antiquated and even tyrannical (*Rhyming* 206). According to poststructuralist thought, echoing Oscar Wilde, literature's only aim should be aesthetic pleasure; it should have no moral function or ethical "aim outside its own being" (Abrams 3).<sup>7</sup> For this reason, this study argues for a revitalization of the Romantic conception of literature's vital role in society, a pressing issue given the prevalence of the poststructuralist view that linguistic play is literature's only function. Smith—whose *Moral Sentiments* was influential for the Romantic movement—recognized literature's important social purpose and therefore gave the arts a central role in his ethical system.

In *Moral Sentiments*, Smith makes a powerful case for the efficacy and affective function of art, for its ability to "excite moral development," "stretch the boundaries of imagination and perspective," and thereby "stimulat[e] self-awareness and self-reflective growth" (Wight 155). Smith's vision of social sympathy will thus be imperative to an analysis of Wollstonecraft's affecting fiction. And the critical theory of Wordsworth and Percy B. Shelley, also influenced by the Moral Sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, will provide a broader understanding of the Romantic notion of literature's crucial place in social and cultural formation. Each arguing for the politicizing potential of poetry, Wordsworth, in his "*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*," and Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, contend that the human imagination can ultimately transform, and re-form, the world. In Wordsworth's words, "the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes"—whether inner or societal—"as might almost appear miraculous" (*Preface* 611-12). Similarly, Shelley suggests that reading poetry is a kind of moral exercise that can develop and augment our ability to sympathize by increasing our

imaginative capacities, and thereby enhance our humanity. “The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution,” Shelley asserts, “is poetry” (*Defence* 876). Smith, Wordsworth, and Shelley’s interconnected conceptions of the effectual power of the literary imagination will therefore provide a contextual framework from which an examination of Wollstonecraft’s efficacious employment of novelistic sympathy will unfold.

I will make reference to Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Men* and her *Rights of Woman* in order to show that *Mary*, Wollstonecraft’s first fictional enterprise, encompasses many of the political arguments she would later advance in her polemical works, and, later still, in *Maria*—which implies that Wollstonecraft considered the affective force of the fictional form a more effective means of communicating her political agenda. In *Mary*, Wollstonecraft utilizes the aesthetic of sensibility to articulate her own revolutionary sensibility, one which incorporates emotion and reason and thus allows for a positive re-designation of the established notions of womanhood. Through her revised version of sensibility, then, Wollstonecraft aspires to re-form the female mind, encouraging a synthesis of emotion and intellect, feeling and social sympathy, imagination and rationality in the female character. Through the affective power of the literary imagination, Wollstonecraft makes a strong case for the rights of woman by both representing woman as she *might* be if she were given a proper education and by depicting the rampant sexism of her own society. As Lynn Hunt argues in *Inventing Human Rights*, the novel of sentiment is connected to the development of a human rights sensibility, teaching the reader to use his or her own conceptual power to envision equality and social justice. In a similar vein, Mark Ellis, as summarized by Ildiko Csengei, contends that “the sentimental novel was a means of moulding the emotions of the reader, as well as addressing urgent political issues of the time,

such as social injustice" (29). Recognizing the debilitating ways in which novels of sentiment have traditionally defined women, Wollstonecraft fashions her own unique version of sensibility, re-structuring and re-shaping it to her own philosophy, suffusing it with her Smithian sympathies, and creating a new sentimental novel that addresses the rights of woman. Thereby, Wollstonecraft redefines 'woman' in a way that facilitates positive progress and change that can be translated into the real world.

In *Mary*, Wollstonecraft advocates for a new woman of sensibility as emblematised by her textual twin, the eponymous, sympathy-extending heroine of her fiction. Wollstonecraft's Smithian sympathies are particularly prominent in *Mary*, in which she attempts to cultivate her reader's sympathy and convert that narrative affect into real-world altruism. The author presents her readers with a female character they might emulate, one with "thinking powers" whose "grandeur is derived from the operations of [her] own faculties" (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 4). In *Mary*, then, Wollstonecraft employs the fictional form to execute her revolutionary agenda. By means of novelistic sympathy, whereby the feelings of the other are "grafted into" the reader by means of the creative imagination, Wollstonecraft encourages readerly collaboration in the reformation of womanhood (Csengei 52). In Wollstonecraft's words, her readers may, in "reforming themselves," seek to "reform the world" (*Rights of Woman* 158).

"Reform" is therefore a key word in Wollstonecraft's radical and rights-oriented lexicon; through her fiction, Wollstonecraft aims to re-form conventional attitudes and beliefs and, by means of readerly affect, she encourages a reformation in "things as they are," to quote from the title of Godwin's novel, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). Thus, through her fiction, Wollstonecraft, that agentive "author-activist," illustrates the moralizing and political potential of the sympathy-inspiring imagination; she shows that the reader's embodied,

felt sympathy for the fictional characters within the literary landscape may transcend textual boundaries and reach into and reverberate in the real world (Kaplan 247). There is a profound connection between the affective dimension of literature and actual altruistic action, for the reader may be actuated by affect. By virtue of the literary experience of sympathy, our moral horizons are expanded: as our sympathy refers outward, enriching our understanding of the other, we are activated by affect and encouraged to respond ethically.

## Chapter One

### **The Ethics of Sympathy: Contemporary Cross-Disciplinary Conversations on Imagination, Sympathy, and Affect**

[T]he universalizing tendency of the moral imagination is encouraged by the very activity of novel-reading itself, with its alternations between identification and sympathy.<sup>1</sup>

—Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*

The emotions shape the landscape of our mental and social lives.<sup>2</sup>

—Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*

#### **1. A Philosophical Perspective—Martha Nussbaum: “Cultivating Humanity”**

##### **through the Literary Imagination**

“[N]ovel-reading,” writes the contemporary political philosopher and virtue ethicist Nussbaum, “will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (*Justice* 12). In a novel, “we enter . . . that full world of human effort, that ‘real substance’ of life within which, alone, politics can speak with a full and fully human voice” (71). For Nussbaum, as for Wollstonecraft, the novel is an effective vehicle for societal commentary and criticism, a crucial catalyst for social and political change. By means of the creative imagination, the fictional form forges a sympathetic link between reader and text, encouraging the reader to make meaningful connections between her own world and the story world within the fictional frame. According to Nussbaum, novel-reading allows for the reader’s “psychic participation” in another’s experience, inspiring compassionate concern for the world and characters within the novel’s pages (*Upheavals* 70).

Moreover, this sympathy for the story world sparked by the creative imagination has the potential to transcend textual boundaries and extend into the real world. Readerly affect, or “affective in-tuneness,” might be translated into actual, prosocial action (Csengei 69). According to Nussbaum, “[t]he experience of readership is a moral activity in its own right, a cultivation of imagination for moral activity in life, and a test for correctness of real-life judgment and response” (*Knowledge* 339). Nussbaum thus contends that the humanities cultivate “compassionate citizenship,” a contemporary iteration of Wollstonecraft’s assertion that female education produces virtuous citizens, “moral agents” (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 432, Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 323). Nussbaum’s emphasis on the moralizing and democratizing power of the literary imagination therefore hearkens back to Wollstonecraft, whose *Mary* is an eighteenth-century exemplification of Nussbaum’s contemporary philosophical arguments about the political power of the fictional form.

Also like Wollstonecraft, Nussbaum is influenced by Smith’s vision of social sympathy, for as Nussbaum recognizes, “Smith attaches considerable importance to literature as a source of moral guidance” (*Justice* 75). Discussing Smith’s *Moral Sentiments in Love’s Knowledge* (1990), *Poetic Justice* (1995), *Cultivating Humanity* (1997), and *Upheavals of Thought* (2001)—indeed, Nussbaum maintains that Smith’s *Moral Sentiments* was “a central inspiration for the project of” *Poetic Justice*—Nussbaum claims that Smith’s insistence on the value and efficacy of literature is based on the understanding that “it is among the ways in which we constitute ourselves as moral, and thus as fully human, beings” (*Justice* xvi, *Knowledge* 346). As Nussbaum writes:

[W]e find, as we read novels, that we quite naturally assume the viewpoint of an affectionate and responsive social creature, who looks at all the scene before him

with fond and sympathetic attention, caring for all the people, and caring, too, for the bonds of discourse that hold them all together. (346)

Insofar as the aesthetic activity of novel-reading cultivates the reader's sympathetic and critical capacities, it is, in Nussbaum and Smith's conception, an ethical activity, a moral exercise, for reading literature expands the reader's ethical awareness, an awareness that might be carried into the "real-life moral sphere" (339). Indeed, even if the reader is confronted with an unsympathetic narrator or an immoral character, such as, for example, William Shakespeare's overreaching Macbeth, the evocation of negative emotions such as fear, anger, or outrage, is equally efficacious as that of the positive, sociable emotions, such as sympathy or pity.<sup>3</sup> Our sense of horror at Macbeth's appalling transgression of the boundaries of humanity, for example, may stimulate self-reflection and a critical investigation of similar transgressions in our own society, thus serving as a catalyst for action.<sup>4</sup> Whether we encounter a sympathetic or an unsympathetic narrator, a virtuous or a vicious character, our literary imagining allows us to become intellectually attuned to the breadth of human experience, to become emotionally invested in another's life and perspective, and thereby exercise our critical capacities. By cultivating discerning readers, literature has the potential to cultivate a more just and ethically aware humanity. Affective aesthetics, then, may engender real-world ethics. However, it must be acknowledged that this is not true for every reader, for not all readers will engage critically with what they read, as Nussbaum also admits.

Although reading literature has undeniable ethicizing and consciousness-raising potentialities, enriching through emotion, illuminating through the imagination, it does not follow that all readers will respond sympathetically or receptively to what they read, nor will all readers be prompted to make evaluative and comparative judgments as a result of that reading.

As Nussbaum notes, “[o]ur society is full of refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion, refusals from which none of us is free” (*Justice* xvii). Moreover, even if an individual does become immersed in what she reads—emotionally invested in a story world and its fictional inhabitants—it does not necessarily follow that narrative affect will stimulate the self-reflection or critical analysis that engenders ethical insight, the readerly interaction that inspires connection-making between the textual world and the reader’s own society. However, the fact that some readers may not respond sympathetically or critically to what they read is not evidence of a failure of literature but of the human imagination’s lack of exercise and development, the “remedy” for which, Nussbaum asserts, is “not the repudiation of fancy, but its more consistent and human cultivation” (xviii). By exercising our imaginative muscle through the reading of literature, we are taught to sympathize with another’s situation, and we are made “capable of inhabiting, for a time, the world of a different person,” which in turn encourages real-world reflectivity that can be socially and politically valuable (*Upheavals* 431).<sup>5</sup> In this way, literature allows us to transcend the boundary between self and other, thus widening our circle of moral concern.

Therefore, as Nussbaum contends, we should construct “exercises in the extension of imagination for our citizens,” exercises such as reading and analyzing literature, which stretch “the boundaries of imagination and perspective” and teach us to utilize and expand our powers of critical thinking (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 430, Wight 155).<sup>6</sup> Yet, Nussbaum is careful to insist that “[w]e need not and should not rely on the fancy of individuals alone” to cultivate a moral citizenry; rather, education “should be . . . informed by ‘fancy’s’ insight” (*Justice* xviii). Similarly, Wollstonecraft maintains that imagination alone will not suffice for her reformative political agenda, arguing that imagination, or “fancy,” must be coupled with reason—which

itself is cultivated through education—if women are to become “free citizens,” emancipated from the “tyranny of man” (*Rights of Woman* 323, 342). Like Nussbaum, Wollstonecraft advances education, comprising rational thought and literary imagining, as the foundation of a just and compassionate society. Thus, Wollstonecraftian resonances are perceptible in Nussbaum’s contemporary work on the affective function, political efficacy, and social significance of the sympathy-inspiring literary imagination, making clear Wollstonecraft’s formative influence and lasting legacy.

## **2. A Literary Critical Perspective—Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith: Advancing Human Rights through Story**

The contemporary critical theorists Schaffer and Smith are also conscious of the political effectiveness of literature. In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004), Schaffer and Smith consider the relationship between personal narratives and human rights, ultimately arguing for “the efficacy of stories,” their power to advance human rights, social justice, and democracy, thus linking their work to Wollstonecraft’s and to Nussbaum’s (233). Schaffer and Smith contend that, for the sufferer of human rights violations, the telling of her story allows for self-assertion and a claim to those basic human rights she has been denied. Recognizing the correlation between personal narratives and political actuality, between storytelling and social activism, Schaffer and Smith affirm the affective power of literature as a crucial catalyst for actual altruistic action. Life narratives, in Schaffer and Smith’s words, “demand that readers attend to histories, lives, and experiences often vastly different from their own”; stories allow people “to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world and of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering” (1).<sup>7</sup> This contemporary work on “the efficacy of stories” applies to

Wollstonecraft's novellas, which demand that readers "attend to [the] histories, lives, and experiences" of women. As will be shown in my analysis of *Mary*, Wollstonecraft gives voice to the women silenced by a repressively patriarchal society through the emotionally affecting fictional form. She poses a challenge to misogynistic modes of thinking by means of an imaginative engagement with the problems and concerns of her society, calling for a reformation in prevailing attitudes about women and about women's place and role in society. Thereby, Wollstonecraft "advanc[es] human rights claims"—in particular, the rights of women—through the novel form. Her novella is thus an eighteenth-century example of what Schaffer and Smith refer to as narratives that "unsettle private beliefs and public discourse," narratives that "generat[e] public debate, sympathy, and outrage" (4). Indeed, as the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Wollstonecraft's fiction has the potential to shape and enrich consciousness and bring about significant societal transformations. That Wollstonecraft's awareness of the social function of sympathy—specifically, that readerly sympathy sparked by the literary imagination—has been resurrected in our contemporary setting speaks to a persistent and enduring understanding of literature's vital role in the public sphere.

### **3. A Psychological Perspective—C. Daniel Batson and Laura L. Shaw:**

#### **"The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis"**

Contemporary work in the field of psychology is also analyzing, and empirically testing, the social significance of sympathy. The social psychologists Batson and Shaw, for example, have tested and found support for the "empathy-altruism hypothesis," which suggests that "empathy evokes altruistic motivation" (112). Batson and Shaw's work is thus a psychology-based version of the literary argument that *readerly sympathy* "evokes altruistic motivation." Although Batson and Shaw have chosen the word "empathy" rather than "sympathy," they

explain that their definition of empathy—a “particular set of congruent vicarious emotions . . . that are more other-focused than self-focused” and thus “distinct from personal distress evoked by perceiving someone in need”—is “indistinguishable from what many philosophers and early psychologists,” such as Hume and Smith, refer to as sympathy (113-4). Like Nussbaum, Batson and Shaw acknowledge Smith’s influence, noting that his *Moral Sentiments* “presented a subtle and graphic description of what perspective taking [sic] involves” (112). Testing their empathy-altruism hypothesis, Batson and Shaw show that “empathic emotion evokes truly altruistic motivation, motivation with an ultimate goal of benefiting not the self but the person for whom empathy is felt” (107). Thus, their research makes a strong case for selfless altruism, in opposition to the long-entrenched Hobbesian view of selfish motivation. Finding “impressive support” for their empathy-altruism hypothesis—as will be shown—Batson and Shaw conclude that the prevailing view that prosocial behavior stems from egoism should be replaced by “a pluralistic explanation” that incorporates *both* altruism and egoism (107). The implications of Batson and Shaw’s work for my study are clear, for the results of their empirical tests provide support for my claim that sympathy—in particular, readerly sympathy cultivated by the literary imagination—may lead to actual altruistic action.

Batson and Shaw conducted over twenty experiments over the past ten years to prove the hypothesis that altruistic behaviour arises from a selfless desire to help, rather than from egoism. The results of each experiment consistently corresponded to the predictions of the empathy-altruism hypothesis. In their analysis, Batson and Shaw outline and counter three “egoistic explanations of the empathy-helping relationship” that oppose the empathy-altruism hypothesis: (1) the “aversive-arousal reduction explanation,” which suggests that the motivating factor behind an individual’s desire to help an afflicted other is simply the desire to reduce her own

aversive arousal in response to the other's suffering; (2) the “empathy-specific punishment explanation,” which claims that social pressure or self-censure are the factors that prompt an individual to help another, that is, that “guilt and shame for failure to help, are attendant on feeling empathy for someone in need”; and (3) the “empathy-specific reward explanation,” which contends that helping behaviour stems from an egoistic desire for reward, whether in the form of “praise, honour, [or] pride” (115). To test the empathy-altruism hypothesis Batson and Shaw ensured that, in each experiment, “some individuals [could] obtain one or more of the possible egoistic goals only by helping, whereas others [could] obtain these goals without having to endure the costs of helping” (114). Ultimately, they found evidence that egoism is not the ultimate goal of prosocial motivation and that helping behaviour can be altruistic. Batson and Shaw argue that, “[p]ending new evidence,” the empathy-altruism hypothesis should “be tentatively accepted as true,” thus championing a pluralistic explanation of prosocial behaviour that includes both altruism and egoism (119).

Batson and Shaw’s conclusions support my claim that the readerly sympathy evoked by the creative imagination can bring about actual ethical response, for if literature evokes empathy—to use Batson and Shaw’s terminology—and “empathy evokes altruistic motivation,” then one might contend that the readerly experience of empathy may engender real-world altruism, which in turn contributes to the greater good. Indeed, according to Batson and Shaw, the evidence found in support of the empathy-altruism hypothesis points to “the presence of a valuable untapped natural resource in our efforts to build a more caring, humane society,” a claim that chimes with Nussbaum’s contention that “compassionate citizenship” may be cultivated through the vital affective experience of reading literature, through what Henry James calls the ““civic use of the imagination”” (Batson and Shaw 120, James qtd. in Nussbaum,

*Knowledge* 193). For Nussbaum, as for Batson and Shaw, there is an important “relationship between emotion and ethical knowledge”: an individual’s empathic response to another’s life and experience, whether evoked within the pages of a novel or in a real-life setting, “promotes habits of mind that lead toward social equality,” cultivating sympathy and moral consciousness and thereby advancing our “common humanity” (Nussbaum, *Knowledge* 23, *Justice* 52). Thus, the commonalities between current research in the fields of philosophy, critical theory, and psychology imply a deep preoccupation with the social emotions—such as sympathy and empathy—and their moralizing, democratizing, or humanizing role in the social and political domains, a concern that reaches across the disciplines.

#### **4. A Sociological Perspective—Kyle Irwin, Tucker McGrimmon, and Brent Simpson: Promoting Social Order through Sympathy**

The question of sympathy’s function in the social order is also taken up by the sociologists Irwin, McGrimmon, and Simpson in “Sympathy and the Social Order” (2008), in which they note sympathy’s instrumental role in moderating self-interest (379). Recognizing that little work has been done on what actually *leads* to sympathy, Irwin *et al.* aim to fill this critical gap. Ultimately, they argue that “perceived interdependence increases sympathy towards strangers” (379). Irwin *et al.*’s two studies support their hypothesis that “sympathy mediates the generalized trust-cooperation link and the relationship between social values and cooperation” (379). Like Nussbaum, and Batson and Shaw, Irwin *et al.* acknowledge the formative influence of Hume and Smith’s work on sympathy’s vital role in the social structure, on its beneficent operation.<sup>8</sup> Irwin *et al.* suggest that since Hume and Smith, “social scientists have pointed to the important social benefits of sympathy,” its role in “acts of benevolence and morality” (381). Irwin *et al.* take a similar stand, arguing that “sympathy [is] rooted in social structure,”

“mediat[ing] individual characteristics and cooperation,” and thus serving an important social function (382, 394). Irwin *et al.* adopt the contemporary psychologist Nancy Eisenberg’s definition of sympathy, “an affective response which arises from the ‘comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, which is *not the same* as what the other person is feeling . . . but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other” (380). Importantly, Irwin *et al.* note that “Batson’s definition of empathy is conceptually identical to [their] view of sympathy” (380). Maintaining that social order “is possible only to the extent that individuals make collectively oriented versus individually oriented choices when these are in conflict,” they assert that “social order is fundamentally about cooperation,” which they define as “behavior that benefits the group or collective, often at the cost of individual benefit” (380-81, 381). And sympathy plays a crucial role in this social cooperation—which Hume and Smith also recognized—for it forges affective links between individuals, moderating self-interest and thereby encouraging harmonious living.

Irwin *et al.*’s work therefore contributes to literature that suggests that emotions—in particular, the prosocial emotion sympathy—“may help some people overcome temptations to act selfishly, which is necessary for producing social order” (394). In short, Irwin *et al.* demonstrate that sympathy serves “as an important moral check” in social functioning, allowing for trust and cooperation between individuals (394). Thus, sympathy is understood by these contemporary sociologists—as by the abovementioned critical theorists and social psychologists—as the cornerstone of a humane society. A fundamental component of our emotional responsiveness to others, sympathy is the source of social unity and morality. Importantly, then, if sympathy can be fostered and developed through the creative imagination—as Smith, Wollstonecraft, and Nussbaum suggest—then literature itself is also a crucial element

in the cultivation of a just society, binding us “together in a network of mutual concern,” contributing to the greater good, to the wider social order, through the amplification of our human sympathies (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 345).

Indeed, by encouraging perspective-taking, self-reflection, critical contemplation, and connection-making between the story world and the reader’s own life, literary imagining constitutes ethically aware individuals. And whether we are confronted with the Satan-serving Faust or the conflicted transgressor Macbeth, the tragically virtuous Cordelia or the fatally innocent Tess, aesthetic activity serves the same purpose, prompting us to consider our possibilities as human beings, our darker tendencies *and* our ethical capacities, our limitations *and* our potentialities. Reading literature has the power to create intelligent and critically aware individuals able to discern between right and wrong actions, individuals furnished with the imaginative and moral equipment necessary to make appropriate ethical judgments. As Nussbaum writes, the novel “can be a paradigm of moral activity,” for “the moral activity of the reader . . . involves not only a friendly participation in the adventures of the concrete characters, but also an attempt to see the novel as a paradigm of something that might happen in his or her own life” (*Knowledge* 148, 166). By sympathizing with the plight of a character within a novel—for example, with the unjust treatment of a female character in Wollstonecraft’s *Mary*—the reader might extend this sympathy into the real world. Meditating on the afflictions of a female character within a patriarchal society might prompt the reader to consider sexism in her own society. The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Hutcheson similarly argues—as summarized by White—that by reading literature, individuals are moved to “enquire more deeply into the reasons for injustice and violated rights in their own societies” (45). Thus, literature, it may be argued, is a powerful vehicle for engendering social and political change.

### 5. A Skeptical Perspective—Suzanne Keen: The Limits of Narrative Affect

While much contemporary work has been done in support of literature's ethicizing and politicizing potentialities, there are also persuasive and compelling counter arguments, such as those posed by Keen in "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" (2006) and "Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character" (2011), that require consideration and response. In "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," Keen points to efforts being made throughout the disciplines "to connect the experience of empathy, including its literary form, with outcomes of changed attitudes, improved motives, and better care and justice," noting that empathy is considered "the feeling precursor and prerequisite for liberal aspirations and greater humanitarianism," something to which Wollstonecraft and Nussbaum would attest (207-8, 208). Defining empathy—which she uses instead of sympathy—as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" that "can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading," Keen aims to demonstrate "why the link between narrative empathy and altruism" is, in her view, "so tenuous" (208, 212). Keen is conscious of current critical concerns about the decline of the reading public, commenting on fears that a decline in readership will ultimately result in the atrophy of affect, in a society lacking crucial empathetic capacities, and thus "incapable of feeling with others" (208). This societal anxiety over the disappearance of a reading public is linked to what Fredric Jameson calls the "'waning of affect'" and what J.G. Ballard refers to as the "'death of affect,'" that is, the abatement of "our ability to feel and feel *for*" (qtd. in Groes and Lewis 5).<sup>9</sup> Nussbaum similarly warns that without the humanities, "we will very likely have an obtuse and emotionally dead citizenry, prey to the aggressive wishes that so often accompany an inner world dead to the images of others" (*Upheavals* 426). Yet, Keen is skeptical about the power of narrative empathy to cultivate a more just, humane, and empathetic

society. She therefore argues against what she refers to as “a utopian vision of narrative empathy,” wary of literature’s ability to foster a more sympathetic, feeling-oriented citizenry (“Temperaments” 297).

Keen suggests, for example, that our cognition, our recognition of the fictionality of what we read, interferes with readerly empathetic responsivity. She maintains that “[f]or a novel reader who experiences either empathy or personal distress, there can be no expectancy of reciprocation involved in the aesthetic response,” and that the “very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void” (“Empathy” 212). She asserts that although “we may feel intense interest in characters,” “incurring obligations towards them violates the terms of fictionality,” and ultimately, the “empathetic response can be diverted from a prosocial outcome through interfering cognition” (212). However, this study makes the claim that literary sympathy—or, in Keen’s terminology, “narrative empathy”—does not induce the reader to want to help the characters within the fictional world, but rather to identify with the characters’ sufferings in a way that inspires self-reflection and connection-making between the story world and the actual world outside the fictional frame. The helping behavior occasioned by novel-reading is therefore not directed towards the fictional characters but towards similar human beings in the real world.<sup>10</sup> As Nussbaum argues, we are aware of the fictionality of what we read, but “we are also aware that these are possibilities for all human beings, hence the story of our own situation in the world” (*Upheavals* 245). “[T]he ‘potential space’ of aesthetic activity,” Nussbaum contends, “is a space with which we investigate and try out some of life’s possibilities” (243). In responding to a work of literature, “we are grasping certain urgent claims, not only about the characters but also about the world and about ourselves,” and thus “[t]he reader or spectator of a literary work” is simultaneously “reading or watching the work,”

“reading the world, and reading her own self” (243). The reader, then, does not seek to change the fictional world but to change herself or the world around her.

Keen also asserts that a reader will not inevitably empathize with what she reads, noting that “the leap between reading and empathizing can fall short, impeded by inattention, indifference, or personal distress” (“Empathy” 213). Further, she argues that “[r]eaders’ cognitive and affective responses do not inevitably lead to empathizing” (213). Keen is absolutely right: it is true that *not all* readers will experience an empathic response to a work of literature, and it is also true that even when a reader *is* affected by what she reads, this affective reaction will not necessarily lead to empathizing or altruistic action. However, the fact remains that many readers *will* experience what Keen refers to as “emotional fusion” with the fictional world and its characters, and that this “emotional fusion,” this sympathetic identification or embodied, felt experience of another, may initiate self-reflection that is ultimately transformative (215).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as has been discussed, this inability or refusal to respond empathetically to literature may be remedied by the stretching of our imaginative and sympathetic capacities through a “‘liberal education’—a higher education that is a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally” (Nussbaum, *Humanity* 9). As Nussbaum asserts, “public education at every level should cultivate the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings,” which “means giving the humanities and the arts a large place in education, from elementary school on up, as children gradually master more and more of the appropriate judgments and become able to extend their empathy to more people and types of people” (*Upheavals* 426). Similarly, Steiner—although acknowledging that since the Holocaust “the value of literate culture to the moral perception of the individual and society” can no longer be assumed—nevertheless contends that “the encounter with the aesthetic is . . . the

most ‘ingressive’, transformative summons available to human experiencing” (“Literacy” 5). “[O]ur experience of art,” Steiner asserts, “is incipient with action” (*Presences* 143). Thus, an education in the humanities, in the art of reading “as total human beings,” might tip the scales, so to speak, and raise the number of people who *do* respond empathetically to what they read, and therefore, who might extend that sense of fellow-feeling to people in the real world (“Literacy” 11).

Challenging this view of the ethical efficacy of literature, Keen further warns that novelists “do not exert complete control over the responses to their fiction” (“Empathy” 214). Therefore, the reader may not feel empathy for a character *intended* by the author to evoke an empathic response, or, the reader may feel for a character *not* intended to inspire empathy. Keen refers to this as “*empathic inaccuracy*”—a term she has coined (222). According to Keen, empathic inaccuracy “occurs when a reader responds empathetically to a fictional character at cross-purposes with an author’s intentions” (222). Moreover, she claims, authors sometimes “evoke empathy unintentionally,” which also “contributes to empathic inaccuracy” (222). Yet, as Schaffer and Smith rightly note, “[s]torytellers take risks”; although they “hope for an audience willing to acknowledge the truthfulness of the story,” unfortunately, “[t]here is always the possibility . . . that their stories will not find audiences willing to listen or that audiences will ignore or interpret their stories unsympathetically”—or, as Keen points out, inaccurately (6). There will always be unsympathetic readers, and there will always be readers who miss the author’s intended point, but this does not deny literature’s ethicizing potential. Literature remains a valuable vehicle for advancing human rights, as Schaffer and Smith have shown, for it is a powerful ethical agent, enriching the reader’s emotional capacities, invoking sympathy, and encouraging its extension into the real world. Moreover, even if the reader does miss the author’s

intended point, she may, by delving into her inner world, arrive at her own equally relevant and equally worthwhile interpretation, which may just as easily lead to actual ethical response.<sup>12</sup>

Further defending her distrust of the power of narrative empathy to invoke such real-world responsibility, Keen makes the important point that an “[a]uthor’s empathy [may] be devoted to socially undesirable ends” (“Empathy” 215). Once again, Keen is correct: there *are* authors who will manipulate their readers’ emotional responsiveness towards unethical ends, but by educating people in careful reading and critical thinking, by encouraging, as Nussbaum suggests, an education in the humanities, readers will be better equipped to recognize when their sympathy is being manipulated for immoral or “socially undesirable” purposes. The educated reader, for example, would be less likely to be influenced by works that are intrinsically propagandistic, such as Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, which promotes hatred. Yet, Keen raises another objection, questioning whether narrative empathy can really “call to us across boundaries of difference” (223). I would respond that it can, and Nussbaum would concur. “To promote empathy across specific social barriers,” Nussbaum argues, “we need to turn to works of art that present these barriers and their meaning in a highly concrete way,” and, according to Nussbaum, “[t]he realist social novel is one such genre: it connects its reader to highly concrete circumstances other than her own, making her an inhabitant of both privileged and oppressed groups in these circumstances” (*Upheavals* 431). Nussbaum maintains that, in this way, the social novel—such as, for example, Wollstonecraft’s *Mary*—“exercises the muscles of the imagination, making people capable of inhabiting, for a time, the world of a different person, and seeing the meaning of events in that world from the outsider’s viewpoint” (431). Mario Vargas Llosa similarly argues that “[g]ood literature erects bridges between different peoples” (9). He contends that “by having us enjoy, suffer, or feel surprise,” literature “unites us beneath the

languages, beliefs, habits, customs, and prejudices that separate us,” creating a fellowship “within human diversity and eclips[ing] the frontiers erected among men and women by ignorance, ideologies, religions, [and] languages” (9-10, 10). Literature, then, allows for an imaginative leap from self to other, and thus, in answer to Keen’s question, literature *can* “call to us across boundaries of difference.” Indeed, not only does literature allow us to sympathize with those of different genders, races, cultures, and sexual orientation, but also with other species, as evidenced by Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877) or E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952). The literary imagination affords us the opportunity to move beyond our own self-interest—through that moral emotion sympathy—and engage with another’s experience.

Keen concludes her compelling and insightful article with the important question: “if a narrative situation devised to evoke empathy fails to do so, does the fault lie in the reader, or in the overestimation of the efficacy of the technique?” (225). As has been discussed, Nussbaum places the responsibility with the reader and so emphasizes the importance of an education in the humanities, which encourages individuals “to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy” (*Profit* 143). Steiner similarly perceives that the act and art of reading entails a moral responsibility on the part of the reader: in the “great discourse with the living dead which we call reading, our role is not a passive one. Where it is more than reverie or an indifferent appetite sprung of boredom, reading is a mode of action” (“Literacy” 10). The literary “technique” *is* efficacious, possessing profound ethicizing and politicizing potentialities that may redound into the real world if the reader is fully engaged.<sup>13</sup> The imagination, what Nussbaum calls “seeing-in,” is a powerful illuminating force that gives “great clarity to the heart” and “nourishes a generous construal of the world” (*Justice* 38). The sympathetic bond established between reader and text by means of the creative

imagination cultivates concern, enhancing the reader's sympathetic repertoire, and thereby encouraging actual ethical response.

Keen goes on to assert that even when a narrative does succeed in evoking empathy, this does not guarantee real-world altruism, claiming that "many readers experience narrative empathy without undertaking prosocial action in the real world" (297). She rightly underlines the difficulty and "unusual effort" required to convey "altruistic impulses arising from narrative empathy with fiction back into the real world" (297). As emphasized above, the solution is, simply, the ongoing improvement of our imaginative capacities through the art of reading. And, indeed, Keen does "cautiously affirm the hope expressed by psychologists of moral development and philosophers of virtue ethics"—such as Nussbaum—"that opportunities for character identification by novel reading may participate in the moral internalization and socialization that can transmute empathic responses into prosocial action" (297). As Keen argues:

While a full-fledged political movement, an appropriately inspiring social context, or an emergent structure of feeling promoting change may be necessary for efficacious action to arise out of internalized experiences of narrative empathy, readers may respond in those circumstances as a result of earlier reading.  
("Empathy" 220)

Thus, although Keen's work, in her words, is "a dissent from the literary version of the empathy-altruism hypothesis formulated by C. Daniel Batson and his research group," she does acknowledge that literature can prepare readers for ethical response, that the literary imagination can predispose people to humanitarianism and philanthropic action.

Keen's incisive analysis of the limits of affect occasions a final crucial question that must be briefly addressed in a study that advances the power of affect—as exemplified in sympathy-inspiring fiction such as Wollstonecraft's *Mary*—to instigate prosocial change: How effective is the literary representation when a reader can simply choose not to read it? The best response to this question is yet another question: what is the alternative? Is it not better to persist in advancing literature as a tool for social and political change rather than to admit defeat because a portion of the population may choose not to read the text? As Llosa asserts, “[w]e would be worse than we are without the good books we have read, more conformist, not as restless, more submissive, and the critical spirit, the engine of progress, would not even exist” (7-8). “Like writing,” Llosa maintains, “reading is a protest against the insufficiencies of life” (7-8). Therefore, we must meet the impending loss of a literate readership—as we must answer the challenge of the current “crisis of meaning” unfolding from deconstruction’s dissociation of ethics from aesthetics—with a revivification of the art of reading literature and a re-affirmation of its moral value, a purpose to which these critical contemporary cross-disciplinary conversations contribute in a significant way (Steiner, “Presences” 33).

The following chapter, then, will show how this concordance of contemporary cross-disciplinary conceptualizations of imagination, sympathy, and affect hearkens back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which sympathy was considered by a number of moral and political philosophers, novelists, and poets as “a binding force or an emotional chain that brings communities together,” as a “powerful means of social cohesion and a moral force that constituted the foundation of self and society” (Csengei 32). Work by Scottish Enlightenment philosophers—such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith—on the social emotions struck a sympathetic nerve in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society, reaching into the fields of

psychology, medicine, politics, and literature. Sympathy was the tenor of the times. Thus, a sympathetic link can be discerned across disciplines and across the centuries. This notion of the inextricability of the literary and the ethical through the agency of sympathy finds its fullest, most potent expression in the works of writers caught up in the revolutionary fervour of the Romantic era.

## Chapter Two

### **The Ethics of Aesthetics: Eighteenth-Century**

#### **Reflections on the Imagination, Sympathy, and Affect**

Some decades stand out as historical crucibles where ideas are forged, ferociously contested, and emerge over time as a paradigm. . . . The struggle for and against such an idea can be observed in all aspects of philosophy, politics and culture. The 1790s in England were such a decade. Natural rights, evolving from natural law and later to become human rights, was just such an idea, and literature was one powerful forge where the idea was tested through the creative imagination and transferred to popular consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

—R.S. White

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.<sup>2</sup>

—Percy B. Shelley

#### **1. Romantic Poetry: Liberating the Mind and Humankind through the Imagination**

The radical poet William Blake (1757-1827), famous for his eccentricity and creative singularity, epitomizes the Romantic understanding of the imagination in his thought and writings, arguing that humanity might be liberated from its “mind forg’d manacles” by means of the imagination; as Blake writes, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: Infinite” (Blake, “London” 179, *Marriage* 191). For the Romantics, the imagination is a profoundly powerful force, enabling the individual to transcend the boundaries of self and other, to perceive and re-create the world anew, and to envision a more just and humane world, for as Blake contends, “[w]hat is now proved was once, only imagin’d”

(*Marriage* 188). “[N]ot just a recorder or mirror,” then, “the mind,” according to Romantic writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), and Shelley, is “an active, synthetic, dynamic, [and] even visionary power” (Wolfson and Manning 5).<sup>3</sup> As Wordsworth proclaims in *The Prelude* (1805)—one long meditation on memory that illustrates the growth of Wordsworth’s own poetic mind—the imagination “Is but another name for absolute strength / And clearest insight, and amplitude of mind, / And reason in her most exalted mood” (13.168-70). Coleridge, with whom Wordsworth wrote *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)—a collaborative collection of poetry that many argue inaugurated the Romantic movement—also reveres the imagination, distinguishing between its “primary” and “secondary” forms in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). According to Coleridge, the “primary” imagination is “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception” and “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (634). The “secondary” imagination, Coleridge contends, is “an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation” (634). It is through the “secondary” imagination that poetry is produced, for the secondary imagination is purely human and therefore controllable, unlike its divinely-given “primary” form. Wollstonecraft too venerates that divine-like imaginative faculty. As Godwin writes in his *Memoirs*, Wollstonecraft found “an inexpressible delight . . . in the splendid reveries of the imagination” and argued that nature “would be no more than a vast blank, if the mind of the observer did not supply it with an animating soul,” echoing Blake’s assertion that “[w]here man is not nature is barren” (Godwin 27, Blake, *Marriage* 189). The imagination, then, is a key term in the Romantic era, and as a faculty fraught with creative and reformatory potentialities, it is essential to the Romantic conception of the writer’s important social role.

Shelley, one of the most outspoken advocates of the poet's vital function in society, boldly proclaims in his *Defence of Poetry* that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (876). Wordsworth similarly declares in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1802) that poets are "the rock and defence of human nature," "bind[ing] together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society," an early anticipation of Nussbaum's analogous claim that literature "binds [us] together in a network of mutual concern" (Wordsworth 606, Nussbaum, *Knowledge* 345). And it is by virtue of the poet's imaginative prowess that she is designated such an elevated social position, for as Wordsworth writes, by "a certain colouring of imagination," the poet presents "ordinary things . . . to the mind in an unusual way," communicating universal truths through the illuminating and morally enriching power of the creative imagination ("Preface" 597).<sup>4</sup> The poet, Wordsworth maintains, describes truths about the human condition—such as the experience of loss, pleasure, or pain—that we all share, and by representing these experiential, felt truths, the poet reveals humanity's fundamental interconnectedness, thereby fostering our sympathetic capacities. Equally convinced of the moral might of the imagination, the Romantic rebel Shelley argues that poetry "awakens and enlarges the mind," "lift[ing] the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and mak[ing] familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" (*Defence* 871). By making the familiar unfamiliar, then, by revealing the "World in a Grain of Sand," the poet awakens the reader's mind to new possibilities, encouraging her to use her own conceptual power to imagine the world anew (Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" 90).

The poet therefore serves a vital social function, orienting the reader towards reformative action through the animating force of the imagination, which allows her to re-see the world and thereby envision new ways of being. Thus, for Shelley, poets "are not only authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting; they are the institutors of

laws, and the founders of civil society,” a claim that Nussbaum would clearly endorse (*Defence* 869). According to Shelley, the poet “not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest time” (869). Thus, like Sir Philip Sidney—who proclaims in his *Apology for Poetry* (1595) that poets imitate the ideal, presenting “what may be and should be”—Shelley argues that poets make moral statements, claims about what ought to be (332).<sup>5</sup> And, as Sidney contends, poets therefore “not only show the way, but [give] so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter it” (340). That is, the literary imagination is a moralizing force; by making normative statements, by giving a picture of how things might be, the poet provides a regulative ideal towards which we in the real world can strive.

The poet therefore enables her readers to navigate themselves towards something better by giving a vision of how things *might* be. As Nussbaum writes, summarizing Aristotle, “[l]iterary art . . . is ‘more philosophical’ than history, because history simply shows us ‘what happened,’ whereas works of literary art show us ‘things such as might happen’ in a human life” (*Justice* 5). Thus, the reader may identify and sympathize with a work of literature in a way she may not with a work of history. Literature, in Nussbaum’s words, “focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves” (5). The aesthetic and highly affective activity of reading literature creates a sympathetic synthesis, an “emotional fusion,” between reader and text, encouraging an emotional responsiveness that historical works often deny (Keen, “Empathy” 215). Most importantly, this empathic accord promotes self-reflection and connection-making between the fictional world, or the poetic landscape, and the real world. Yet, poetry—and literature in general—does more. Like the Roman poet Horace (65-8 B.C.E)—who

asserts that the poet should both ““delight and instruct””—Shelley maintains that poetry “is ever accompanied by pleasure: all spirits on which it falls, open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight” (Horace qtd. in Leitch *et al.* 123, Shelley, *Defence* 870). Sidney similarly proclaims that poetry is “a speaking picture – with this end, to teach and delight” (331). In Boccaccio’s words, poetry “veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction” (258). Thus, poetry combines aesthetic pleasure with didacticism, gilding its moral message in the delightfulness of aesthetic form.

For both Wordsworth and Shelley, then, poetry is a powerful form possessed of reformative potentialities. Indeed, each maintains that the moral faculty of the imagination, from which poetry springs forth, can ultimately transform the world. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth concludes that he can inspire an inner revolution in his readers by helping them realize their own imaginative power through his sympathy-inspiring poetry, “[i]nstruct[ing] how the mind of man” can become “[a] thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells” by virtue of the imagination (13.447-48). In this way, Wordsworth fulfills what he sees as his poetic task, “bind[ing]” humanity “together by passion and knowledge” in a world renewed by the sympathetic imagination (“Preface” 606). Shelley too argues that “[a] man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively,” “he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own” (*Defence* 871). “The great instrument of moral good,” the poet asserts, “is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause” (871). According to Shelley, then, “Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb”; that is, reading poetry exercises the imagination, which he defines as the “great instrument of morality” because it fosters fellow-feeling, teaching the individual to

sympathize with others (871). Thus, by creating poetry, Shelley, like Wordsworth, believes that the poet can contribute to the betterment of humanity, cultivating human sympathy through the creative imagination.

Therefore, according to these revolutionary Romantic poets of both the first and second generation, reading poetry is instrumental in the development of the reader's imagination, which in turn fosters and expands the reader's sympathy, sharpening moral sensibility. Imaginative role-taking enjoins the reader to sympathize with another, allowing for a "sharing of affect," an embodied experience of another's perspective (Keen, "Empathy" 208). Literature broadens our moral awareness, teaching us to become emotionally attuned to the experiences of others. By developing that other-oriented, moral emotion—sympathy—literature may cultivate what Nussbaum refers to as "compassionate citizenship." Reading literature, then, is an aesthetic activity that activates and accentuates affective and sympathetic response, and the readerly sympathy inspired by the literary imagination may predispose the individual to benevolent action in the real world.

## **2. Scottish Enlightenment Philosophers: The Social Function of Sympathy**

This literary-based understanding of the social function of the sympathetic imagination dovetails with work by Scottish Enlightenment philosophers such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, whose conception of sympathy's mechanism provided a conceptual framework for the imaginative writers of the Romantic era. The "philosophy of social benevolence" developed by these eighteenth-century philosophers was influential in the culture of sensibility (to be discussed later in this chapter) that flourished during the period, which, following these thinkers, advanced sympathy as a cohesive force in society (White 43). Reacting against the Hobbesian view that humanity is innately self-interested, these Moral Sense

philosophers argued for humanity's fundamental benevolence, advocating sympathy as a crucial, connective element in the social order. In his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), for example, Shaftesbury argues that human beings possess “natural affections” that foster the public good and encourage sociability, and thus, social harmony (qtd. in Csengei 34). And sympathy is a pivotal factor in the operation of our “social affections,” since it is, in Csengei’s words, the channel through which the “social pleasures reach us” (34). Thus, for Shaftesbury, as for the Moral Sense philosophers in general, human beings are naturally sociable and possess an intrinsic ability to discern between right and wrong, opposing the Hobbesian view that humanity is governed by self-interest (34).

Hutcheson, teacher of Smith, and, as Csengei notes, disseminator of Shaftesbury’s philosophy, similarly argues that human beings are innately sociable and benevolent. He developed and advocated the concept of “moral sense,” which refers to the capacity to appreciate virtue, that is, “actions and affections” that benefit the well-being of the public (34-5). According to Hutcheson, the only explanation for “disinterested acts” of compassion—actions from which we do not receive self-benefit or reward—is an inbuilt benevolence (35). As Csengei explains, this inherent benevolence is, for Hutcheson, the basis of “moral sense” (35). In addition to moral sense, Hutcheson also argues that human beings possess “public sense,” which is synonymous with sympathy (35). As Hutcheson writes in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728), sympathy—or “public sense”—is “our Determination to be pleased with the happiness of others, and to be uneasy at their misery” (qtd. in Csengei 35). Therefore, our natural sympathy for others is what allows for a harmonious society of sociable human beings concerned with the well-being of others, and thus, with the overall public good, an anticipation of Irwin *et al.*’s understanding of sympathy as operating to a similar social end.

Moreover, as White elucidates, Hutcheson—although “not a creative writer himself”—“uses literary examples of how our ‘Passions’ are activated by the representation of good and evil actions in affective works” (44). Thus, like his student Smith—as will be demonstrated—Hutcheson recognizes that literature is an important tool for the activation of our social sympathies. By reading about injustice in a story world, we are moved to consider injustice in the real world.

Hume too connects sympathy with our affective responses to art, arguing that aesthetic pleasure is founded on the intensity of our sympathetic, emotive reactions to a work of art (Csengei 36, Hume, *Human Nature* 368-9). Moreover, Hume’s philosophical position similarly advances sympathy as intrinsic to humanity. As Neil McArthur states, “Hume thinks our sociable affections are rooted in human nature,” and that “[w]e are naturally linked to others through the mechanism of sympathy” (18). For Hume, as for Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, this natural sympathy for others is a crucial cohesive force in society. “Sympathy,” Hume asserts in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), “is a very powerful principle in human nature,” it is “that principle, which takes us . . . far out of ourselves” and affords us the opportunity to experience another’s happiness or sorrow (369, 370). McArthur notes that for Hume, sympathy “is an involuntary, physiological reaction to the joys and sufferings of others, one that actually allows us to experience their reactions as if they were our own” (18). According to Hume’s conception of sympathy, then, “[w]e do not just imagine the other person’s suffering. We feel it” (18). And it is this inherent sympathy for our fellow human beings—this ability to physically *feel with* another—that allows for our discernment between right and wrong actions and encourages sociability and social harmony (Csengei 35). As Hume argues in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751):

no qualities are more entitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind, than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species. (9)

Hume maintains that these qualities “seem to transfuse themselves . . . into each beholder, and to call forth, in their own behalf, the same favorable and affectionate sentiments, which they exert on all around,” anticipating Smith’s claim that “[t]he passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously,” “affect[ing] the spectator with some degree of a like painful . . . emotion” (Hume, *Morals* 9, Smith 9, 5). According to Hume, then, our inbuilt sympathy for others, our ability to enter into another’s experience and feel what she feels, facilitates social connectivity.

However, Hume complicates this notion of sympathy’s benevolent and socially beneficial operation, tempering it with the acknowledgment that our own self-interest may impede our sympathy for others: sympathy, writes Hume, “is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us, much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous” (*Morals* 45). Like the contemporary social psychologists Batson and Shaw, then, Hume recognizes the complexity of human nature, its incorporation of both egoism and genuine altruism. But Hume contends that, because of humankind’s tendency to self-interest and the social and geographical barriers that separate individuals within the wider world, “it is necessary for us, in our calm judgments and discourse concerning the characters of men, to neglect all these differences, and render our sentiments more public and social” (45). Indeed, Hume asserts that “[i]f we consider the principles” of human nature, “we must, *a priori*, conclude it impossible for such a creature as man to be totally indifferent to the well or ill-being of his fellow-creatures”

(45). Thus, according to Hume, humanity is governed not by self-interest but by a natural regard for others. As he writes, “a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society, does always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues” (45). Humanity, then, although susceptible to selfish behaviour, is naturally inclined towards benevolent action, and our fellow-feeling, our sympathy, is an essential element in social bonding and functioning.

Like Hume, Smith—“Hutcheson’s most famous student”—acknowledges humanity’s selfishness while simultaneously affirming the fundamental human benevolence that fosters social collectivity, linking individuals together through sympathetic reciprocity (White 46). “Perhaps [the] most influential” of the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers “for writers of Sensibility and Romanticism,” Smith advances sympathy as a powerful force “that regulates ethical relations” between individuals in society (Pinch 52). Although known best today for his *Wealth of Nations* (1776), a primer on economic theory, Smith was better known in his own day for his *Moral Sentiments*, which delineates his influential philosophy of social sympathy (52). Indeed, as White notes, Smith himself “is reported to have valued more highly his earlier *Theory of Moral Sentiments*” (46). According to Smith, as illustrated in his *Moral Sentiments*, although humans are undeniably selfish, they are also intrinsically beneficent and predisposed to altruistic behaviour, with the ultimate goal of benefiting the other, not the self. Smith, White explains, “was developing Hutcheson’s teaching on benevolence” in his own theory of social sympathy (46). As Smith writes, “[h]ow selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it”; “[o]f this kind,” Smith continues, “is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of

others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner” (3). Indeed, according to Smith, even the “greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without [pity or compassion]” (3). And this fellow-feeling is activated by an imaginative engagement with the other’s experience. The imagination, then, is at the center of Smith’s theory of social sympathy.

The imagination, for Smith, is the mechanism whereby we gain insight into another’s experience. He maintains that, “[a]s we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” through our imaginative faculty, that moralizing force that allows us to cross the threshold between self and other (3). Indeed, “it is by the imagination only,” according to Smith, “that we can form any conception of” another’s “sensations” (3). “By the imagination,” he maintains, “we place ourselves in [another’s] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person” (3). Smith is careful to note that we do not feel *exactly* what the other person feels but experience only what we ourselves would feel in the same situation: “It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of [the other], which our imaginations copy” (3). For Smith, then, sympathy is evoked through the imagination. By entering into an imaginative engagement with another’s experience, the “agonies” of the other are “brought home to ourselves,” and “when we have thus adopted and made them our own,” our sympathy is enlisted (4). The imagination is therefore the moralizing instrument through which sympathy operates: “by changing places in fancy with the sufferer,” Smith writes, “we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels” (4).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, because literature engages the imagination so intensely, Smith singles it out as an essential component of his moral theory, for reading

literature exercises the individual's imagination, thereby cultivating her sympathetic aptitude and encouraging ethical response in real-world relations.

According to Smith's *Moral Sentiments*, then, because literature awakens the reader's sympathy through the experience of imaginative perspective-taking, "moral development is stimulated best through immersion in the arts" (Wight 156). Smith's ethical theory implies that "moral unfolding is the stretching of one's emotional sensibilities"—achieved, for example, through literature—"such that one is led to act in a more virtuous manner" (158). As Wight explains, Smith's moral philosophy suggests that "[r]ight action cannot be determined merely through rational mind" but "requires active 'imagination' to expand the experience of emotional sympathy"; "novels, films, music, paintings, and other arts inductively create emotional connections that heighten this process" of moral and emotional development (158). Moreover, our sympathy for characters within a work of literature—which broadens our "experience of emotional sympathy"—prepares us for sympathy towards individuals in our own society.

Sympathy, then, is a central concept in the Smithian lexicon, a preeminent moral faculty that binds society together in what Nussbaum calls "a network of mutual concern" (*Knowledge* 345). As Csengei writes, according to Smith, sympathy "is the constructive core of human consciousness and subjectivity," the "founding principle of all human morality and social existence" (51). Therefore, for Smith, as for Hutcheson and Hume, sympathy is "'the great cement of human society', the creator of civilised social existence" (40). This understanding of sympathy as a powerful, socially-binding, and morally-enriching force was adopted by such Romantic writers as Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, and Shelley. In fact, these reformatory authors put the philosophy of social sympathy into practice, applying it to their writings and thereby seeking to cultivate a more "compassionate citizenship" through the evocation of readerly

sympathy. As White notes, although imaginative writers of the Romantic era may not have been following “with close interest the philosophical niceties of social thinkers like Hutcheson and Smith,” they “were aware of the broader psychological and political models” and “were reflecting them more or less consciously in their poems and novels” (49). It is “very clear,” White asserts, “that philosophy and certain kinds of novels”—and I would add, certain poems such as those produced by Wordsworth and Shelley—“from 1750 to 1800 ran alongside each other and worked mutually from a similar theory or model of social justice” (100). Moreover, the ideas and philosophies of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers would have been disseminated through Johnson’s famous literary circle, which included such authors as Cowper, Paine, Blake, Godwin, Price, Priestley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Wollstonecraft, and as White relates, “even after [Johnson’s] death, the circle met and expanded to include Leigh Hunt and Shelley” (39, 40). Through Johnson’s circle of radical writers, the leading philosophies of the day were circulated and debated.

The increasingly popular medium of literary journals was another means through which Scottish Enlightenment philosophy would have filtered through to Romantic writers. According to Stabler, “[e]ighteenth-century novels and essays in the *Spectator* and *Rambler* transmitted the discussions of Shaftesbury, Hume, and Hutcheson about social relationships through to a wider audience” (29). Sympathy was the word of the day, and its influence was spreading throughout the fields of philosophy, psychology, medicine, politics, and literature. And as Csengei notes, it was “through the widespread influence of the moral sense school of philosophy” of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers that sympathy emerged as such “an important concept of eighteenth-century sensibility” (32). “The powers of sympathy” as expressed by Smith in his *Moral Sentiments*, Pinch argues, became “a crucial theme in many of the poems, plays, and novels of

the writers of Sensibility and Romanticism” (52). Indeed, sympathy lies at the very heart of the culture and literature of sensibility.

### **3. The Two Faces of Sensibility: Affectation and Affect**

A literary and cultural phenomenon flourishing in the eighteenth century, sensibility, or sentiment—like the Moral Sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers—seeks to counter the Hobbesian view that humanity is intrinsically selfish and driven by the desire for power and prestige. Stressing humanity’s innate benevolence and championing the social benefits of sympathy—advanced, as we have seen, by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith as the cornerstone and connecting force of the social structure—sensibility aims to illustrate that the “central elements in morality are [our] feelings of sympathy and ‘sensibility’ – that is, a hair-trigger responsiveness to another person’s distresses and joys” (Abrams 291). Thus, the ideal male or female of sensibility is finely attuned to the emotions and experiences of others, able to sympathize with and feel for another’s pain, fear, or happiness. The literature of sensibility therefore abounds with sympathetic sighs, swoons, and tears, reveling in displays of exaggerated and melodramatic emotion, exemplified by the emotionally overwrought, lovelorn protagonist of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774)—the quintessential sentimental novel that many scholars point to as a formative work for British Romanticism. Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), referred to by Kelly as his “avant-garde Sentimental novel,” was also influential, as was his 1762 novel *Émile, ou de L’education*, which “locates the inception of a moral sense in ‘the first stirrings of awakening sensibility in the heart of a young man,’” a moral sense that “operates through empathetic sympathy for the weak and suffering” (Kelly, “Introduction” xii, White 4). Importantly, as will be seen, Wollstonecraft had a “dynamic and difficult relationship with Rousseau’s thinking about sensibility,” as she did with the culture

and literature of sensibility in general (Parke qtd. in Conger 104). Although drawn to sensibility's espousal of social sympathy, Wollstonecraft was especially averse to its celebration of excessive, almost theatrical, emotion, of bodily and mental sensitivity—thought to stem from the individual's finely tuned nerves.

Indeed, this aspect of sensibility together with its neurological inference, which Wollstonecraft clearly challenges in *Mary*, is implicit in the 1797 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s definition of sensibility as ““a nice and delicate perception of pleasure or pain, beauty or deformity”” that ““seems to depend upon the organization of the nervous system”” (qtd. in Pinch 49). Pinch notes that “[t]he culture of Sensibility popularized . . . new scientific theories of the human body,” which, “following the work of Sir Isaac Newton . . . stressed the nervous system as the body’s receptacle for sensation” (52). Faubert explains that the culture of sensibility—and the novel of sentiment in particular—was informed by nerve theory, which argued that the human body contained “physical, though invisible, fluids that flow through superfine tubes, or nerves—and, the theory went, the finer or more delicate the nerve, the more sensitive the person (and in the literature of sensibility, the more admirable and feminine the heroine)” (“Introduction” 45). “[C]ertain bodies,” then, were thought to be “more predisposed to being nervous, especially the bodies of women and aristocrats” (44). Thus, one’s nervousness, one’s sensitivity and tendency to be overcome by emotion, came to signify one’s sensibility, which in turn came to symbolize one’s gender or social status. “An exquisite Sensibility,” writes Pinch, “was a badge of social distinction” (51). And because fine nerves were associated with aristocracy, the lower and middle classes would often *affect* sensibility in order to imitate the nobility, something which Wollstonecraft strongly condemns in both her fiction and her polemical works. As Wollstonecraft states in *Rights of Men*, for example, “[i]t would be an

arduous task to trace all the vice and misery that arise in society from the middle class of people apeing the manners of the great" (54). Yet, according to Wollstonecraft, even more detrimental to society than the lower classes' habit of *affecting* sensibility is the dangerous female tendency to affect bodily weakness. The ideal female, the culture of sensibility suggests, is weak to the point of debilitation, emotionally sensitive to the point of enervation, an ideal represented, and celebrated, in novels of sensibility.

Thus, to counter this pernicious representation of femininity, some women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would satirize the conventional sentimental female in their novels, such as Frances Burney in her 1778 novel *Evelina*, in which the languishing Lady Louisa—a typical female of sensibility—proudly proclaims, “I am *nerve* all over!” (286). Wollstonecraft too censures this crippling aspect of sensibility in the character of Eliza, the mechanistic, novel-reading mother in *Mary* who has “so relaxed her nerves” that she has become “a mere nothing,” an apt definition of the conventional woman of sensibility (5). And because “women were, traditionally, the greatest consumers of novels of sensibility,” this ideal of womanhood insidiously filtered into female consciousness (Faubert, “Introduction” 11). The ideal of feminine sensibility, then, was widely disseminated through the sentimental novel, representations of that lovelorn and languishing wraith-like figure, condemned to forever sigh, weep, and swoon, proliferating its pages. Although positive in its orientation towards social sympathy and humanitarianism, sensibility is also a powerful patriarchal instrument that oppresses women, emphasizing—and perversely extolling—their weakness, intellectual inferiority, irrationality, naivety, sickliness, vulnerability, and apparent tendency to emotional excess, an image reiterated and advanced in sentimental novels.<sup>7</sup>

Wollstonecraft denounces the damaging effect of the sentimental novel on the female sex in her *Rights of Woman*, asserting that women are corrupted by “the stupid novelist,” who “work[s] up stale tales, and describe[s] meretricious scenes, all retailed in a semimetal jargon” (330). Deprived of reason because denied a proper education, and instructed in the wrong sort of sensibility, as will be explained below—which schools women in subjection, indoctrinating them into a cult of feminine delicacy and dependency—women are made “slaves to their bodies” as well as to man (156). “Their senses . . . inflamed, and their understandings neglected,” Wollstonecraft laments, women “become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling” (177). Thus, according to Wollstonecraft, women are not *naturally* weak, intellectually inferior, and overly emotional but *taught* to be so through an education in conventional sensibility and those frivolous female accomplishments—such as drawing, dancing, and singing—that merely prepare them for the marriage market. Wollstonecraft therefore refers to marriage as a form of “legal prostitution,” for, valued only for their bodies and required to “marry advantageously” if they want “[t]o rise in the world,” women are treated as commodities, mere objects to be exchanged between families (*Rights of Woman* 286). “[S]ubjected by ignorance to their sensations,” women are “only taught to look for happiness in love,” and, Wollstonecraft maintains, “[n]ovels, music, poetry, and gallantry” are to blame for *making* women such “creatures of sensation” (330, 177). She therefore concludes that femininity is a social construct, condemning female education and the culture of sensibility—and sentimental novels in particular—for nurturing weakness and dependence in women rather than fostering strength and independence.

Wollstonecraft’s relationship with sensibility is conflicted, to say the least. Although she “formed her ideas and identity within” the “culture of Sensibility”—which “provided the

intellectual, aesthetic, and political framework for all of [her] writings,” and which contributed to her understanding of social sympathy—she was acutely aware of sensibility’s “Janus-face,” its championing of human sympathy and social philanthropy on the one hand, and its affected form and degradation of women on the other (Kelly, “Introduction” xi, Csengei 30). As Conger states, Wollstonecraft’s life and work were “a continuing tribute to, as well as a stringent test of, sensibility” (*Sensibility* 18). Conscious of sensibility’s debilitating effect on women, Wollstonecraft therefore fashions her own unique and reformative version, one which encompasses emotion and reason, feeling and imagination, and the theory of benevolence and social sympathy advanced by such Moral Sense philosophers as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith. Moreover, recognizing the novel’s powerful influence on the social “construction of femininity,” Wollstonecraft seeks to promulgate her re-formed sensibility by means of the fictional form (Faubert, “Introduction” 35).

Through *Mary*, Wollstonecraft transmits her revolutionary sensibility, one which empowers rather than enervates women. As Kelly asserts, Wollstonecraft aspires to “counter the conventional novel’s presentation and reproduction of women’s moral and intellectual inferiority by means of false sensibility” through her own feminist fiction (*Revolutionary* 43). In so doing, Wollstonecraft recalibrates and reconfigures female identity in a way that is emancipatory, providing, through her agency-endowed female character, an example of how women might exist in a more liberated space, free from the oppressiveness of falsely constructed and constricting categories of female identity imposed upon them by a male-dominated, sensibility-obsessed society. By re-writing the conventional novel of sensibility and infusing it with her feminist thought and Smithian-inspired theories of social sympathy, Wollstonecraft aspires to counteract

the negative effects of sentimental culture on women and provide the means through which her transformative agenda might be realized. As Catherine N. Parke argues:

[Wollstonecraft] aimed to create a literature that would be sufficiently sympathetic and passionate to accommodate her conception of sensibility as the ground of thinking, but also sufficiently stable and public to incorporate her notion of justice as the primary characteristic of a distinctive and new kind of sensibility that would be both personally and politically satisfying to women. (qtd. in Conger 104)

Wollstonecraft achieves this aim in *Mary*, in which she combines her re-formed sensibility of social sympathy, feeling, and reason with her revolutionary feminist thought and theories of education, thereby including political “persuasions to action” within her fiction (Steiner, *Presences* 144). As Wollstonecraft maintains in *Rights of Woman*, “[w]hen . . . I advise my sex not to read such flimsy works”—that is, sentimental novels—“it is to induce them to read something superiour,” and *Mary* is an example of that “something superiour” (332).<sup>8</sup> *Mary* presents its readers with a woman with both feeling and “thinking powers,” a female character whose “grandeur is derived from the operations of [her] own faculties”—an agentive female heroine whom women might emulate (*Mary* 4).

Thus, because her society refuses to educate women—or, educates them only in feminine delicacy and frivolity—Wollstonecraft seeks to educate them herself through the novel form; recognizing that women are its most avid readers, she re-directs the novel’s power of affect towards reformation. As she proclaims in *Rights of Woman*, “all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to

render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society” (129). Therefore, in taking up the “subject of female education” in *Mary*, Wollstonecraft aims to counter the likes of Rousseau and Gregory and instead empower women by teaching them to think. Indeed, as Wollstonecraft explains, when she “exclaim[s] against novelists,” she is referring to those conventional sentimental novelists whose work “contrast[s] with those . . . which exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination,” an apt description of Wollstonecraft’s novella (330-31). Wollstonecraft therefore employs the fictional form to execute her revolutionary agenda. In *Mary*, she makes a political gesture concerning female education, disseminating her reformative feminist thought and galvanizing her readers towards social and political change—change that could result in the emergence of a new kind of woman in the Romantic period.

Self-educated and individuated, Wollstonecraft’s new woman also embodies the philanthropic spirit espoused by sensibility and by the Moral Sense philosophers of the eighteenth century. The sympathetic heroine of *Mary* is animated by a sense of fellow-feeling, which she extends to society throughout the novella, caring for her family and friends, as well as for strangers of various classes, remaining resilient to the end in her altruistic resolve of visiting “the sick, support[ing] the old, and educat[ing] the young” (*Mary* 61). By representing such a woman in her sympathy-inspiring fiction, Wollstonecraft encourages her readers to imitate this humanitarianism in their own societies.<sup>9</sup> Wollstonecraft would therefore concur with White’s assertion that the intention of the sentimental writer “is not primarily affectivity and emotional indulgence,” but “the didacticism that teaches broad social sympathy and benevolence of action” (42). It is the moral value of sympathy—the ethical possibilities of feeling—that is the heart of the matter in Wollstonecraft’s re-formed sentimental novel, *Mary, A Fiction*.

## Chapter Three

### **Revolutionary Writing and Recuperative Reading:**

#### **On the Politics of Sympathy in *Mary, A Fiction***

Literary works . . . show us general plausible patterns of action, ‘things such as might happen’ in human life. When we grasp the patterns of salience offered by the work, we are also grasping our own possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

—Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*

At times . . . written work radiates an influence much greater than is apparent; at times, it answers—years in advance—the questions and needs of the collectivity, if the writer has known how to experience them first, through inner doubts and agonies.<sup>2</sup>

—Eduardo Galeano

As Godwin—novelist, anarchist, political philosopher, and defender of individual freedom—proclaims in his *Memoirs*, if his radical and reformative wife “had never produced anything else,” *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) “would serve . . . to establish the eminence of her genius” (42). “The story is nothing,” writes Godwin, but “the feelings are of the truest and most exquisite class; every circumstance is adorned with that species of imagination, which enlists itself under the banners of delicacy and sentiment” (42). Notwithstanding Godwin’s problematic use of the term “delicacy”—a designation Wollstonecraft would likely have taken issue with since it epitomizes that crippling cultural construction of femininity that she sought so fervently to subvert—his description of Wollstonecraft’s first fictional enterprise as conveying “feelings” “of the truest and most exquisite class” is apt, for it is indeed in the novella’s evocation of feeling wherein its genius resides.<sup>3</sup> An “author-activist,” Wollstonecraft utilizes affective aesthetics as an

avenue for social and political change, awakening her readers to injustice, advocating for the rights of woman, and encouraging altruism through the ethic of sympathy, a prosocial, “community-forming” emotion that prepares the individual for philanthropic action (Kaplan 247, Csengei 40). Just as the contemporary social psychologists Batson and Shaw argue that “empathy evokes altruistic motivation,” so Wollstonecraft recognizes that *readerly sympathy*, or narrative affect, may elicit ethical action or benevolent behaviour in the real world (112). Thus, although Wollstonecraft, in a letter to her sister Everina on March 22, 1797, refers to her first novella as “an imperfect sketch” and “a crude production” that she would “not very willingly put in the way of people whose good opinion, as a writer, [she would] wish for,” it is clear that Godwin, an accomplished writer “whose good opinion” Wollstonecraft *would* “wish for,” admired and respected the work, as he should have, for *Mary* is a fiction that informs, warns, and aspires to reform (*Letters* 405, 404).

### **1. Introduction: The Mechanics of Wollstonecraft’s Sympathy-Inspiring Fiction**

Fiction, then, is Wollstonecraft’s chosen form for achieving her revolutionary end. The mechanics of fiction operate in such a way that the reader is brought into an imaginative engagement with the story world and the beings inhabiting that fictive world, allowing for the reader’s “psychic participation” in the experience of another and thereby fostering fellow-feeling, a sympathetic identification that gives rise to “a sense of shared possibilities” (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 70, *Knowledge* 390). This is the artistry of fiction: it “overwhelms us with the pulsating inner lives of its characters,” and, in so doing, teaches us “about the depths and integrity of others” (Weinstein, *Recovering* 475). The art of reading, one could argue, is one and the same with the art of feeling, for reading fiction “shock[s] and educate[s] us about the scope and intensity of human feeling” (476). In being brought into the inner world of fictional

characters, we “humanize” those characters “as we vicariously share their lives” (476). In this way, “we learn to endow others—not merely characters, but the manifold other opaque, living human beings who cross our path in the world (outside books) that we inhabit—with consciousness” (476). Fiction, in teaching us “to feel and feel *for*,” moves us “from self to world” (Groes and Lewis 5, Weinstein, *Recovering* 476). As Wollstonecraft herself asserts, “[t]hose writers are particularly useful . . . who make man feel for man,” those imaginative, fiction-making artists who illuminate the moral possibilities of feeling (*Rights of Woman* 288). Wollstonecraft is just such a writer; in *Mary*, she employs the feeling-oriented art of fiction to rouse the reader’s sympathy, encouraging her to become “a concerned participant” in the life and experience of her liberal-minded and socially progressive female protagonist (Nussbaum, *Knowledge* 390). The mechanisms whereby Wollstonecraft draws her readers into her sympathy-inspiring fiction—the emotionally engaging narrative technique of free indirect discourse, affective storytelling, and sympathetic characterization—serve to enhance the experience of aesthetic activity and persuade the reader to become emotionally invested in the fictional world. Thus, the reader, feeling with Wollstonecraft’s fiction, is predisposed to respond sympathetically to the author’s call for change, and potentially, to step outside the fictional frame and become a co-author of such change in her own society.

#### **A. Emotive Narrative Technique: Free Indirect Discourse**

Narrative technique is a powerful means through which Wollstonecraft creates a sympathetic synthesis between reader and text that might prompt real-world responsivity. Free indirect discourse, “or reported inward speech and thought”—Wollstonecraft’s chosen technique—“requires the reader, like the heroine, both to think and feel” (Kelly, “Introduction” xviii). In this narrative technique, “the omniscient third-person narrator represents . . . the

subjective life of the protagonist, fusing third-person and first-person narration, engaging readers in the protagonist's inner life yet also holding readers at a critical distance from complete emotional identification with this character" (xviii). In moving back and forth between the heroine's inward thoughts and the third-person narrator's distanced perspective, "the reader," writes Kelly, "is drawn into a sympathizing yet reflective attitude towards the novel's central subject"—education—"and, like [the heroine], undergoes a small exercise of both 'sensibility' and 'mind'" (xix). As Wood argues, free indirect discourse allows us to "see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once" (11).<sup>4</sup> Mary's journal entries—written at moments of heightened emotion and thus infused with intense feeling—are particularly effective in conveying the heroine's inner workings; they afford the reader the opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the heroine's subjective experience, which in turn causes the reader to care about Mary and sympathize with her suffering.

By revealing Mary's "inward speech and thought" through her journal entries, Wollstonecraft allows the reader to gain entry into Mary's most deeply felt convictions and emotions. As will be shown, Mary, because of her self-education and her independent mind and spirit, is set apart from the rest of society, and in her loneliness she turns to her diary, lacking in life a like-minded soul to whom she can communicate her inner world. Indeed, even Mary's close friend Ann, whom she loves "better than any one in the world," does not provide Mary the companionship she desires; Mary is aware that she and Ann are "not congenial minds" (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 18). The reader therefore becomes Mary's silent companion, the person to whom she conveys her inner self and feelings. In this way, a sympathetic allegiance is established between reader and fictive character. As Margaret Atwood has suggested, "our

existence in language is dialogic, double-voiced,” and thus the reader may function as the respondent to Mary’s personal musings (Grace 197). Granting the reader this privileged insight into Mary’s most private feelings, then—feelings she can express only in her diary—Wollstonecraft makes the reader privy to Mary’s inner world and so intimately involved in her story.

The reader shares Mary’s misery when, “wounded by ingratitude” and thus sinking “into apathy,” she records an emotionally charged journal entry about the limits of sympathy (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 48). Having found her “favors forgotten” by an impoverished family she has taken under her care, and having suffered the “abuse” of a poor widow she is also supporting—temporarily unable to continue her philanthropy because of a fever she has contracted—Mary laments, “‘Too well have I loved my fellow creatures’” (48). Having extended her compassion to her “‘fellow creatures,’” Mary expresses her regret that she herself has been denied “‘the healing balm of sympathy’” (48). This passage, fraught with intense emotion, conveys well Wollstonecraft’s effective use of free indirect discourse, for Mary’s written fragment, her affecting articulation of her inward thoughts and feelings, abounds with exclamation marks, dashes, and rhetorical questions that communicate to the reader—Mary’s silent confidant—the extent of the heroine’s mental turmoil (Kelly, “Introduction” xix). Mary writes of her “‘throbbing heart’” and of her “‘death-like sadness which presses so sorely’” upon her, revealing to the reader the profundity of her emotion (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 48). And Mary’s rhetorical questions—such as, “[d]o all suffer like me; or am I framed so as to be particularly susceptible of misery?”—enhance the reader’s sense of being addressed directly by the heroine, thus encouraging a kind of sympathetic interaction between reader and character. Indeed, the reader *does* “suffer like” Mary through the embodied experience of sympathy achieved through

Wollstonecraft's emotionally evocative narrative technique, a technique that adds to the heroine's psychological depth. Allowed entry into Mary's subjectivity through reading her diary, the reader feels Mary's misery, for, according to Smith, we "feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner," as we are here by Wollstonecraft's affective narrative technique (3). By means of the participatory imagination, the "agonies" of the other are "brought home to ourselves," and "when we have thus adopted and made them our own," they begin "to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what [the other] feels" (4). "[T]o conceive or to imagine" another's sorrow, Smith maintains, "excites some degree of the same emotion" (4). In this way, then, the reader is made to *feel* Mary's misery through this intimate imaginative sharing in her personal reflections, and thus, the reader's sympathy is oriented towards Wollstonecraft's heroine. The reader becomes that congenial mind that Mary is lacking in her own life.

Because the reader is situated in this privileged place, acting as Mary's sympathetic companion, she is able to partake in Mary's joy as well as in her misery, experiencing Mary's ecstatic reverie as she composes a "rhapsody on sensibility," a declaration of her faith in the social benefits of sympathy that is renewed by her witnessing the positive effects of her philanthropy. As she watches the children of the poverty-stricken family she has been providing for "sporting on the grass, with improved complexions," and as the mother, with tears, thanks Mary for her generosity, "Mary's tears" flow "from [genuine] sympathy," from those "affections which [bind] her to her fellow creatures" (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 49). This surge of sympathetic feeling inspires Mary to compose her "rhapsody on sensibility," which she refers to as "'the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible,' a moral sentiment that "'soften[s]' the soul and thus "'dispose[s]' the individual 'to be virtuous'" (49). The reader's close

relationship with Mary—established through Wollstonecraft’s emotionally resonant narrative technique of free indirect discourse, whereby she inserts Mary’s personal reflections and meditations in order to include the reader in her heroine’s subjective life—recalls the reader to her own moral susceptibility, to that “exquisite feeling” of “sensibility” that may “dispose” *her* to be “virtuous” in her own life. By facilitating the reader’s intimate involvement in Mary’s internality through her sympathy-stirring narrative technique, Wollstonecraft fosters a finely-tuned readerly awareness and lively responsivity that may set the reader’s own moral sensibility in motion. Just as Mary experiences a “‘sensual gratification’” in feeling her “‘eyes moistened after having comforted the unfortunate’”—as described through her interior reflections—so the reader, having delved into Mary’s interiority, may experience a vicarious emotion that might motivate her to comfort “the unfortunate” in her *own* society (50). Thus, through Mary’s emotive exposition on sensibility, the reader is educated in Wollstonecraftian sensibility, which is informed by an ethics of active compassion.

While conventional sensibility espouses a concern with philanthropy that is more commonly affected than effected, Wollstonecraftian sensibility—as expressed by Mary—advocates genuine sympathy that is actualized in benevolent action. Mary’s soliloquy on sensibility is in praise of the Wollstonecraftian form, of which Mary is a representative. Significantly, Mary’s description of sensibility could well apply to the experience of readerly affect, for sensibility, as Mary describes it, is that “‘delicacy of feeling, which enables us to relish the sublime touches of the poet, and the painter,’” that wakens us to and aligns us with the moral possibilities of art (50). Mary’s understanding of sensibility, then, is akin to sympathy; it allows the reader or spectator to appreciate—through the evocation of feeling—a work of literature or a work of art. Indeed, according to Hume, aesthetic pleasure is *founded* on the

intensity of our sympathetic, emotive reactions to art. Thus, indwelling within Mary's journal entry on sensibility is a paradigm for how the reader should respond to Wollstonecraft's fiction. Wollstonecraft's narrative technique, then, which blends first-person and third-person narration, has a twofold purpose: it grants the reader access to Mary's inner world, therefore enhancing sympathetic engagement, eliciting the reader's emotion, and developing her moral sensitivity, and it forces the reader to take a step back and reflect on the implications of this sympathetic reading. Fiction such as Wollstonecraft's *Mary* returns us to our capacities as human beings, reminding us of our own rich inner worlds and stimulating self-reflection, which in turn gives rise to ethical insights.

### **B. Affective Storytelling: Augmenting Sympathy through Autobiographical Infusions**

Wollstonecraft's affective storytelling—achieved through the infusion of autobiographical material—further reinforces readerly sympathy. As Wollstonecraft maintains in *Rights of Woman*, in order to describe well, one must have “forcibly felt . . . the charm which natural affections and unsophisticated feelings spread round the human character” (309). “It is this power of looking into the heart, and responsively vibrating with each emotion,” Wollstonecraft writes, “that enables the poet to personify each passion” (309). Wollstonecraft, then, having “forcibly felt” the feelings described within her fiction, can better “personify each passion,” and it is this evocation of emotion that engages the reader and stirs her human sympathies. The heroine’s relationship with the invalid Ann, for example, is a fictionalized account of Wollstonecraft’s own close friendship with Fanny Blood, with whom, Godwin tells us, Wollstonecraft “contracted a friendship so fervent, as for years to have constituted the ruling passion of her mind” (*Memoirs* 18). Thus, Wollstonecraft can powerfully convey her heroine’s grief when Ann succumbs to her illness, her ““slow, sudden-death”” bringing about an

“impenetrable gloom” for Mary (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 32). Because Wollstonecraft is writing from experience—her friend Fanny died after having delivered her baby prematurely—she can cogently communicate, through her fiction, the emotions Mary endures. Through narrative affect, then, Wollstonecraft creates a sympathetic link between reader and fictive character, allowing the reader to feel Mary’s sorrow. As Smith argues, “grief . . . strongly expressed in the looks and gestures of any person,” such as, for example, a fictional character, “at once affect[s] the spectator”—or reader—“with some degree of a like painful . . . emotion” (5). As a “sensation, capacity, or force felt in the body,” affect “lends intensity and amplification” to our emotive responses to another’s feelings (Schaffer and Smith 6). Thus, by instilling her narrative with emotion she has felt in her own life, Wollstonecraft augments the reader’s affective experience.

Wollstonecraft’s inclusion of her own unhappy familial experience further enlists the reader’s sympathy. Just as Wollstonecraft “experienced in the first period of her existence, but few of those indulgences and marks of affection, which are principally calculated to sooth[e] the subjection and sorrows of our early years,” so her fictional heroine is similarly deprived of parental affection (Godwin, *Memoirs* 9). Mary’s mother’s “partiality” for Mary’s brother recalls Wollstonecraft’s own mother, whose “partiality was fixed upon the eldest son” (9). And Mary’s father Edward—possessing the same name as Wollstonecraft’s own father—is as “tyrannical and passionate” as the author’s father, who, Godwin tells us, “was a man of a quick, [and] impetuous disposition, subject to alternate fits of kindness and cruelty” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 8, Godwin, *Memoirs* 9). The reader therefore feels the authenticity of the heroine’s fear as she “dread[s] lest [her father] should frighten her mother to death,” recalling Wollstonecraft’s father, whose “quickness of . . . temper, led him sometimes to threaten . . . violence towards his wife

(Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 8, Godwin, *Memoirs* 11). That the feelings expressed within the narrative have actually been felt in Wollstonecraft's own family life intensifies the reader's sympathetic responsiveness, binding the reader to Mary's story.

Mary, then, bearing her author's name, is a fictional representation of Wollstonecraft herself. And just as Wollstonecraft was able to overcome "the blighting winds of unkindness [and] indifference" shown her by her own family through "the superiority of [her] mind," so her fictional character rises above her familial disappointments through her self-education and solitary ramblings amid nature (Godwin, *Memoirs* 10). As the fictional duplicate of her author—who was "distinguished in early youth" by an "exquisite sensibility, soundness of understanding, and decision of character"—Mary, sympathetic, intelligent, and independent, personifies the reformed and revolutionary female identity Wollstonecraft sought to embody in her own life (9). Wollstonecraft therefore enhances the already affective and "amplifying experience" of fiction by including her own personal experience, activating readerly sympathy and cultivating sympathetic investment by showing that the experience and emotions described within have actually been felt (Eliot "Natural" 56).

By incorporating such autobiographical material in her fictional narrative and assigning her self-educated female protagonist her own name—indicating that the heroine is indeed her second self—Wollstonecraft invests her sentimental fiction with authority through factuality, authenticating her text by infusing it with the realism of her own experiential insight. As Kelly comments, "[t]he Sentimental text aimed to convince the reader by demonstrating . . . that the author both knows and feels whereof he speaks," thereby validating the views expressed and stimulating sympathetic engagement by representing "'things such as might happen'"—and *have* happened—"in a human life" (Kelly, "Introduction" xix, Nussbaum, *Justice* 5). In reflecting, and

critiquing, an image of her own sexist society on her fictional canvas—imbuing it with realism—Wollstonecraft seeks to incite indignation at ‘things as they [presently] are’ and thus mobilize her readers towards reformative action.<sup>5</sup> *Mary* “makes its author’s claim to be what was then called a ‘philosophical’ novelist, in the sense of the ‘philosopher’ as social and cultural critic,” for Wollstonecraft forcefully critiques the systemic sexism of her own society through the emotionally engaging fictional form (Kelly, “Introduction” xv). As Steiner argues, “[a]ll serious art, music and literature is a *critical act*; “the construct of the artist,” Steiner writes, “is a counter-statement to the world” (*Presences* 11). He maintains that “[a]esthetic means embody concentrated, selective interactions between the constraints of the observed and the boundless possibilities of the imagined” (11). The aesthetic representation of a real “observed” present interacting with an “imagined” future, then, is inherently critical. Wollstonecraft’s heroine embodies just such an “imagined” future possibility for woman as she interacts in an “observed” world—a fictional yet realistically represented world—hostile to female genius. *Mary* therefore epitomizes that “serious” art that Steiner calls a “counter-statement to the world,” illustrating “that things might be,” or “shall be,” “otherwise” (11). As Emily Dickinson writes, “The Possible’s slow fuse is lit / By the imagination” (689). Thus, by means of the literary imagination, Wollstonecraft lights the “Possible’s slow fuse,” navigating her readers towards what might be. Wollstonecraft effectively marries ethics and aesthetics, tying “‘art’ to ‘life,’ the ‘aesthetic’ to the ‘practical’” (Booth 5). By investing her art with life, that is, with her own personal experience, Wollstonecraft shows that the issues raised within are relevant to the real world.

Therefore, Wollstonecraft’s infusion of authenticating autobiographical detail into a narrative clearly reflecting her contemporary society encourages readerly receptivity, just as her

emotive narrative technique assures the reader's immersion in that narrative. A cogent combination of autobiography and fiction, then, a masterful melding of personal narrative and imaginative invention, *Mary*, like other life-writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—whether fictionalized or not—lends itself “to the reformist and revolutionary” objectives of its author (Harding 446). As Anthony Harding argues, radical-minded writers such as Wollstonecraft and Godwin were conscious of “the potential of personal narrative to document injustice, and initiate social or political change” and thus utilized the form to put forth their libertarian, rights-oriented agendas (446).<sup>6</sup> The contemporary literary theorists Schaffer and Smith similarly suggest that life narratives are “potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims” as they provide an avenue for those having suffered injustice to articulate their story and thereby call attention to the need for transformative action (1). For Wollstonecraft, the fictional autobiographical form enables her to expose the pervasiveness of gender inequity and the pernicious effects of the cultural construction of femininity. By interweaving the factual with the fictional, by imbuing the imagined with the actual, Wollstonecraft transforms *Mary* into a powerful political tool that simultaneously reveals social injustice and evokes empathic response. Wollstonecraft’s affective storytelling, then, whereby she augments readerly sympathy by indicating that what is represented within the fictional landscape is actually a reflection of the real world, and of her own life, is part of her mechanism of feeling. As an adept architect of readerly affect, Wollstonecraft draws her readers into her fiction through feeling and thereby makes them more receptive to the political agenda communicated therein.

### C. Sympathy-Inspiring Characterization: Mary's Self-Education, Sympathy, and Subversiveness

Wollstonecraft's characterization of her heroine is yet another mechanism whereby she skilfully enlists her reader's sympathy. Indeed, Mary's characterization is Wollstonecraft's most effective literary technique, through which she establishes Mary as her exemplar of a female genius, a woman of sympathetic feeling, and a new, socially subversive woman of sensibility. An examination of each of these aspects of Mary's characterization will follow, delineated in three separate subsections. The progress of Mary's self-education through her reading, solitary walking, and critical thinking to its culmination in her fully realized sympathetic feeling—exemplified in its extension in her boundless acts of benevolence—form Mary into her author's revolutionary female of sensibility, a transgressive Wollstonecraftian new woman. Integrating emotion and reason, sympathetic feeling and rational intellect, and transfusing her "delicacy of feeling" into actual philanthropic action, Mary stands apart from the conventional heroines of sentimental novels who *affect* or *perform* emotion and sympathy merely to *appear* feminine or aristocratic. Mary genuinely *feels* compassion and, recognizing that "virtue should be an active principle," extends her fellow-feeling—fostered through reading and self-education—into real-world relations (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 54). The reader, if emotionally involved in Mary's narrative—feeling with the heroine—may be inspired to act in a similar manner in her own life; in Wollstonecraft's hands, sympathy becomes "a moral tool" (White 48). The reader, by being immersed in Mary's personal struggle to become self-educated and to survive in a world unfit for the new kind of woman she becomes, comes to know Mary and care about her suffering, to feel alongside the heroine. As Weinstein argues, "the voyage" into literature "is visceral and experiential, it entails vicarious immersion in others' lives, endowing us with new eyes and ears"

(*Scream* xxi). In the sympathetic character of Mary, then, Wollstonecraft presents her readers with her revolutionary sensibility and her transformative version of womanhood, advancing an intellect-invested feminine identity and a socially-conscious and sympathetic sensibility of genuine affect to counter the conventional self-conscious and selfish sensibility of affectation. In so doing, she encourages her readers to emulate her heroine's example of a reformed womanhood, including "persuasions to action" in her feeling-oriented fiction (Steiner, *Presences* 144). Mary's self-education is the means through which she metamorphoses into Wollstonecraft's new woman of sensibility.

#### **a. The Self-Education of a Female Genius: The Evolution of Mary's Character through Reading, Solitary Walking, and Critical Thinking**

Wollstonecraft's characterization of Mary—as unfolded in her self-education, by which she evolves into that fully individuated, uniquely independent, and radically sympathetic woman of sensibility—draws the reader into closer alignment with the heroine, for the reader comes to understand the "herculean" extent of Mary's educational undertaking, and, in this way, feels the full force, and grasps the significance, of the author's critique of the present state of society (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 282). Mary, inhabiting an oppressive, male-dominated social order that denies women a proper education—a society akin to the author's—must educate herself. *Mary* is thus a *Bildungsroman* with a twist, a novel of education with a feminist slant, for it depicts the self-education of a female genius within a society unaccustomed to educated and intellectually-minded women. In fact, in a letter to her friend, the Reverend Henry Dyson Gabell, in 1787, Wollstonecraft states of *Mary*: "I have lately written, a fiction which I intend to give to the world; it is a tale, to illustrate an opinion of mine, that a genius will educate itself," an idea she likely acquired from Rousseau, with whose thinking she had a complicated relationship

(*Letters* 136). As Wollstonecraft writes to Everina on March 24, 1787—a few months before she started *Mary*—“I am now reading Rousseau’s *Emile* [sic], and love his paradoxes. He chuses [sic] a common capacity to educate – and gives, as a reason, that a genius will educate itself” (114-115). In *Mary*, the radical feminist Wollstonecraft cleverly adjusts this Rousseauian concept of self-education and applies it to women, transforming his exclusive, male-centred conceptualization of education into a female-focused educational enterprise.

Thus, as the “Advertisement” to Wollstonecraft’s reformatory fiction declares, her novella will present “the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers,” the mind of a female genius who, as a consequence of systemic sexism, must educate herself (*Mary* 4). Wollstonecraft therefore creates a heroine whose character is formed independent of society, a Rousseauian “solitary walker,” a social outcast “unable to find happiness or a place in” the “corrupt” system in which she finds herself (Kelly, “Introduction” xii-xiii). Mary, left to her own devices—because neglected by her card-playing, lapdog-doting mother Eliza—rambles in nature and listens to stories read to her by her housekeeper while her brother is afforded the benefits of a public education. Becoming adept in the art of reading, in the artistry of aesthetic feeling—as the reader does in reading Wollstonecraft’s fiction—Mary pursues “with avidity every book that [comes] in her way” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 8). James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1727-30), Edward Young’s *The Complaint; or, Night-thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality* (1742), and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) are a few of the works on Mary’s reading list—indicative of her appreciation of the sublime in literature since these works are, “respectively, examples of the descriptive, the pathetic, and the epic sublime in poetry” (Kelly, “Explanatory Notes” 181). Importantly, Mary’s reading is coupled with critical thinking: “left to the operations of her own mind, [Mary] consider[s] every thing that [comes] under her inspection, and learn[s] to think,”

which is, Wollstonecraft tells us in *Rights of Woman*, the purpose of education—that “cultivation of mind” that teaches “young people how to begin to think” (*Mary* 8, *Rights of Woman* 305).

Although Mary is denied the opportunity of a public education, then, she remedies this by educating herself through reading and critical contemplation and therefore learns how to think independently. And the reader, absorbed by affect, invested in the life of this character, begins to comprehend the almost heroic nature of Mary’s feat, for “she has difficulties peculiar to her sex to overcome, which require almost super-human powers”: the entirety of Mary’s education must be achieved through self-exertion (*Rights of Woman* 282).

Mary derives her education and capacity for independent thought from nature as well as from books. Indeed, following her solitary ramblings in nature, Mary stays up all night—her “favourite time for employing her mind”—“conversing with the Author of Nature, making verses, and singing hymns of her own composing” (*Mary* 13). Mary’s meditations in nature develop her intellect and feed her genius, prompting her to contemplate “what end her various faculties [are] destined to pursue,” which in turn allows her to achieve “a glimpse of truth” (13). Significantly, “it [is] mostly the grand or solemn features of Nature” that Mary “contemplate[s]” as she “employ[s] her mind” and teaches herself to think (13). In a kind of pre-Wordsworthian pantheistic reverie, Mary “stand[s] and behold[s] the waves rolling, and think[s] of the voice that could still the tumultuous deep,” anticipating Wordsworth’s divine presence in “Tintern Abbey” that “impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought” and dwells within the “light of the setting suns, / And the round ocean, and the living air” and “the mind of man” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 13, Wordsworth lines 101-2, 98-99, 100). Attracted to sublime natural settings, then, to vastness and mystery—typically associated with masculine consciousness—Mary subverts gendered stereotypes, for according to eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, as espoused, for

example, in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the sublime—evocative of power, immensity, darkness, and terror—is associated with men, and the beautiful—suggestive of delicacy, littleness, brightness, and tranquility—with women. Thus, Mary, her mind “filled” with “[s]ublime ideas,” blurs the boundaries between male and female, her ability to appreciate the sublime *proving* that gender is not innate but formed by culture and education (8). Self-educated, Mary does not conform to her society's expectations; her literary practices, solitary ramblings in the natural world, and habits of critical thinking form her into a Wollstonecraftian new woman, a female genius able to appreciate sublimity and capable of reasoned thought. The political intent of Wollstonecraft's fiction thus intersects with her mechanics of sympathy, for, by means of Wollstonecraft's sympathetic characterization of Mary, the reader is made receptive to the new woman Mary becomes and may be inspired to imitate her example.

In delineating Mary's self-education in this way, Wollstonecraft distinguishes her female protagonist from typical sentimental heroines, immersing her readers in the life of a heroine endowed with intellect and thus orienting them towards reformation. Possessed of a “wonderful quickness in discerning distinctions and combining ideas, that at the first glance did not appear to be similar,” Mary exhibits abilities conventionally attributed to men, abilities she has cultivated through her self-education (18). Thus, Wollstonecraft here demonstrates the efficacy of her heroine's self-education, which has fortified Mary's mind, stimulated her self-awareness, and developed her powers of reflection—which is what Wollstonecraft's fiction should do for the reader. Yet, in presenting her heroine as a Rousseauian “solitary walker,” an isolated being within a society that denies women the opportunity to cultivate their reason through education, Wollstonecraft attests to the need for social and political change, implying that if more Marys

populated the pages of novels, or, more importantly, if more Wollstonecrafts populated the world outside the novels' pages, society would be positively transformed. But because Mary inhabits a world—like Wollstonecraft's—plagued by systemic sexism, she must educate herself, and consequently, she becomes a kind of outcast, thus embodying the Rousseauian notion that “psychological conflict and social alienation” is inherently connected to the “corrupt and unjust state of modern society, culture, and government” (Kelly, “Introduction” xii). Rousseau’s understanding of the interconnection between inner “psychological conflict” and outer political degeneracy “enabled educated middle-class people to understand themselves as revolutionary subjects who were, inevitably, ‘solitary walkers’ unable to find happiness or a place in what they perceived to be the decadent and corrupt system of ‘things as they are’” (xii-iii). Wollstonecraft aligns herself with this Rousseauian revolutionary vanguard, asserting in a letter to Godwin on August 17, 1796 that she “will become again a *Solitary Walker*” (*Letters* 349). And like her author, Mary is a kind of revolutionary exile, forever estranged from a society that will not acknowledge female genius. Mary’s brave assumption of the role of “solitary walker” to realize her true identity further enlists the reader’s emotional involvement and wakens her to the injustice of such alienation being imposed upon the heroine. In this way, Wollstonecraft inspires the reader’s respect and admiration for this revolutionary, intellectual, and self-sufficient heroine, who is set apart from conventional, intellect-deprived, and slavishly dependent sentimental heroines.

Unlike the typical sentimental heroine, Mary is possessed of “a metaphysical turn,” which “incline[s] her to reflect on every object that pass[es] her by” (*Mary* 24). Consequently, Mary is free of prejudice, for every opinion is carefully examined prior to being adopted. For example, Mary, a Protestant, is open to considering arguments opposed to her own belief system,

for when introduced to “deistical notions”—that is, the acceptance of God’s existence “based on reason” and the “reject[ion] of scriptural religion”—Mary carefully considers both systems of belief, delving into further research rather than holding rigidly to her own position (Kelly, “Explanatory Notes” 183). Reading Joseph Butler’s *The Analogy of Religion* (1736)—which, Faubert explains, “argues that the similarity between the Biblical account of divine rule and natural law proves that there must be one Divine source for both,” defending orthodox religion from attacks by religious skeptics such as Hume—Mary “examine[s] the evidence on which her faith [is] built” before forming any conclusions (Faubert, “Footnotes” 104, Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 24). In this way, Mary becomes “a christian [sic] from conviction,” learning “charity,” understanding that “apparently good and solid arguments might take their rise from different points of view,” and “rejoic[ing] to find that those she should not concur with had some reason on their side” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 24). Thus, Mary’s self-education has sparked her genius, cultivating her powers of critical thinking and thereby undermining prejudice and encouraging rational consideration of the opinions and beliefs of others, and her example may prompt the sympathetic and emotionally engaged reader to adopt Mary’s rational, unbiased modes of thinking.

Through the self-educated, intellectually accomplished Mary, then, Wollstonecraft exposes the cultural fallacy that women are, by nature, incapable of genius. Importantly, as Kelly elucidates, “[g]enius,” according to Wollstonecraft’s use of the term, “is not the transcendent, superhuman individualism later promoted by Romantic culture but rather the distinct and unique individuality valued by the culture of Sensibility” (“Introduction” xvi). In Wollstonecraft’s time, “most would have considered only men to be capable of such ‘genius’, and most women to be mere copies of each other” (xvi). Wollstonecraft therefore crafts her own female genius, an

individuated and singular being—like herself—to show that genius in women is possible. Mary is Wollstonecraft's "philosopher in the making," for in conversation the "faculties of [Mary's] soul" unfold "themselves . . . and the most graceful, unaffected gestures [give] energy to her discourse" (Taylor 36, Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 27). In Mary's company, "a man, past the meridian of life, of polished manners, and dazzling wit," is roused by her "genius, and cultivation of mind," her presence causing him to doubt "whether heaven [is] peopled with spirits masculine" (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 50). Indeed, he almost forgets "that he [has] called the [female] sex 'the pretty play things that render life tolerable'" (50). This anticipates Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, in which she criticizes man for treating woman as his "toy, his rattle," which "must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused" (144). Thus, this "dazzling wit" of a man, whose attitude towards women is strikingly Rousseauian, is re-formed by his association with the intellectually competent Mary; she shows him that women are capable of reasoned thought, and therefore, that women are not innately inferior in intellect but bred to be so. Mary, having expanded her mind and developed her genius through her self-education, is evolving into a Wollstonecraftian new woman of sensibility, an evolution in character accompanied by the cultivation of Mary's sympathy.

#### **b. The Unfolding of Sympathetic Feeling: The Fulfillment of Mary's Self-Education in Philanthropy and in her Emergence as a New Woman**

In exercising her imagination through avid reading, Mary has stretched her sympathetic capacities and enlarged her ethical awareness. Thus, Wollstonecraft here anticipates Nussbaum, who maintains that reading literature "is among the ways in which we constitute ourselves as moral, and thus as fully human, beings," for "as we read novels . . . we quite naturally assume the viewpoint of an affectionate and responsive social creature, who looks at all the scene before

him with fond and sympathetic attention, caring for all the people, and caring, too, for the bonds of discourse that hold them all together" (*Knowledge* 346). As Wight argues, the literary experience of sympathy "allows us to see anew with the perspective of others," and it is "through [such] interior reflections" that, according to Smith's ethical theory, "[m]oral conscience unfolds" (159). Just as Mary's reading has unfolded her moral conscience, so the reader's ethical scope has broadened through her emotional engagement with Wollstonecraft's heroine, which has taught her to conceive of and care about the heroine's feelings. Wollstonecraft therefore shows how Mary's self-education—her reading in particular—has activated and amplified her natural sympathy, clear in her devotion to her perpetually sick mother Eliza, despite the neglect and indifference her mother shows her in return. Indeed, Mary's mother's sickness "call[s] forth all [her] tenderness, and exercise[s] her compassion so continually, that it [becomes] more than a match for self-love," attesting to Irwin *et al.*'s hypothesis that sympathy mitigates self-interest (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 8). By demonstrating that Mary's filial sympathy remains unflinching in the absence of any reciprocity, Wollstonecraft conveys through her eighteenth-century fiction what Irwin *et al.* show in their twenty-first-century empirical study. This anticipation of Irwin *et al.*'s hypothesis speaks to the innovation of Wollstonecraft's text, suggesting that she was one of the pioneers promoting the notion—which has persisted into the present day—that sympathy tempers selfish behaviour, connecting individuals and thereby contributing to better social functioning. Moreover, Wollstonecraft illustrates this notion in a sympathy-inspiring fiction that may cultivate sympathetic readers who, in turn, might become compassionate world citizens.

Mary's compassionate care for her dying father further validates the claim that sympathy is other-oriented and thus moderates self-interest, for the narrator informs us that Mary's "grief" has "nothing selfish in it," and although he has not been "a friend or protector" for Mary, she

supports him nevertheless, staying by his side night after night and impairing her own health in the process (19). As Hutcheson would maintain, Mary's "disinterested acts" of compassion—that is, actions from which we do not receive self-benefit or reward—arise from an inbuilt benevolence (Csengei 35). Similarly, Smith suggests that sympathy arises from authentic compassionate feeling rather than from self-interest. According to Smith's moral sentiments model, "[f]or growth in moral consciousness to occur . . . there must be genuine feeling," a contention that "contrasts with those," like Hobbes, "who have argued that all behavior—even that which might be considered altruistic—is really just a disguised form of selfishness" (Wight 159). Hence, through her compassionating heroine, Wollstonecraft advances her view that humanity is inherently sympathetic. She also shows that, through education, this sympathy may be further cultivated and extended to the wider society, serving as a powerful socially-binding force; the amplification, and extension, of Mary's sympathy has unfolded from the expansion of her mind through her self-education. Wollstonecraft therefore demonstrates the efficacy of literature through the literary form by creating a character within her fiction whose powers of sympathy are fostered by immersion in literature and by her exercises in close critical analysis—whether of literature, the natural world, or religious thought. In short, Wollstonecraft shows the reader the ethical value of literature through literature itself, cleverly constructing a character within her fiction who is herself a reader and who has been made more sympathetic through her reading.

Mary, motivated by altruism—her sympathetic feeling, Wollstonecraft suggests, a natural corollary of her self-education—extends her compassionate concern beyond her family to her ailing and poverty-stricken friend Ann, the eldest daughter of "a poor widow, who had been brought up in affluence, but reduced to great distress by the extravagance of her husband"

(Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 10). Mary's genuine benevolence here anticipates Batson and Shaw's assertion that "empathic emotion evokes truly altruistic motivation," for Mary's sympathetic feeling, her emotional responsiveness, is actualized in her caring for Ann, translated into real-world altruism, thereby demonstrating Wollstonecraft's reformative purpose in her fiction (107). Because Ann's reckless father—having "destroyed his constitution" while spending the family fortune—has died and left his wife and five children "to live on a scanty pittance," reducing them to near poverty, Mary adopts the role of male protector and provides for the family (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 10). Seeking out logical solutions to the family's impoverished state, Mary pays the rent Ann's family cannot and prevails upon her father to "succour the family"—although "the utmost she could obtain was a small sum very inadequate to the purpose, to enable the poor woman [Ann's mother] to carry into execution a little scheme of industry near the metropolis" (17). Importantly, "Mary's arguments" to her unfeeling father on behalf of Ann's family are "drawn from motives of philanthropy and friendship," that is, from genuine altruism rather than from egoism, echoing, for example, Shaftesbury's contention that human beings possess an inbuilt benevolence and Hume's assertion that sympathy is inherent to human nature (17). Therefore, through affective aesthetics, Wollstonecraft communicates to the reader her politically-oriented vision of social sympathy, and the reader, through the sympathy-inspiring experience of literary imagining—invested in Mary's story through Wollstonecraft's sympathetic characterization—may be actuated by affect, encouraged to extend her *own* sympathy into the real world. The heroic aspect of Mary's benevolent behaviour—clear in her efforts to help Ann and her family re-establish themselves—demonstrates that Mary's circle of ethical consideration is not limited to her family, and thus further affirms for the reader the moral worth of sympathy;

through her compassionate character, Wollstonecraft teaches the reader to hold sympathy's value in high regard and confirms it as an essential element in the wider social order.

Indeed Mary's "affective in-tuneness," developed by her reading practices, is not reserved only for those "near and contiguous"—to use a phrase of Hume's—but includes strangers as well (Csengei 69, Hume *Morals* 45). Thus we see Mary intensely affected by witnessing the dead body of an unknown woman who, after having been "obliged to leave her sick child while she earned her daily bread," stabs herself out of despair (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 9). This extension of Mary's sympathy towards strangers is also expressed when she relieves the wants of poor fishermen—thereby learning "the luxury of doing good," the "sweet tears of benevolence . . . moisten[ing] her eyes"—and when, "miserable when beggars [are] driven from the gate without being relieved," she "give[s] them her own breakfast" (12, 9). Mary's benevolence, the narrator tells us, "[knows] no bounds; the distress of others carrie[s] her out of herself," and she will not rest until she is able to relieve or comfort the afflicted (12-13). Having exercised and expanded her sympathetic capacities through her self-education, Mary is emotionally responsive to real-world suffering. And the reader—having read Wollstonecraft's fiction and sympathized with its heroine—may be made similarly responsive to suffering in her own world. As Weinstein asserts, literature is a pathway "of feeling, and our encounter with [it] is social, inscribing us in a larger community" (*Scream* ix). Thus, in the same way that Mary has, as Nussbaum would say, cultivated her humanity by becoming adept in the art of feeling through the art of reading, so the reader may cultivate *her* humanity, having been educated in the moral value, the "ethical import," of literature (Steiner, *Presences* 144).

The influence of Smith's *Moral Sentiments* is particularly evident in the abovementioned passage, in which the narrator states that "the distress of others carrie[s] [Mary] out of herself,"

implying that Mary's sympathy "creates an almost palpable bond between herself and the objects of her pity" (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 12-13, Faubert, "Footnotes" 90). According to Smith's conception of sympathy, "[t]he passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously," "affect[ing] the spectator with some degree of a like painful . . . emotion," a description that adequately denotes the effect the distress of others has on Mary (Smith 9, 5). As Csengei comments, Smith's sympathetic theory implies that the sentiments of the other "have a physical impact on [the] body," and in this way, the other becomes, in a sense, "part of an extended self" (52). And this sympathetic synthesis, this affective fusion between self and other, is replicated in readerly affect as the reader becomes one with Mary through an empathic engagement with her character. Wollstonecraft also shows that as Mary's sphere of sympathetic concern widens, so too does it cross social barriers; Mary's education has taught her to "concern [herself] with the good of other people," despite their class (Nussbaum, *Justice* xvi).<sup>7</sup>

While Wollstonecraft's understanding of human nature and sympathy is informed, at least in part, by Hume's philosophy, she demonstrates her originality of thought by dissenting from the philosopher, for Mary, in extending her sympathy to strangers of various classes, undermines Hume's claim that "sympathy with persons remote from us" is "much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous" (*Morals* 45). Mary's experience in the art of reading has taught her about the "depths and integrity of others," enriching her ethical awareness and fostering her fellow-feeling (Weinstein, *Recovering* 475). Having been moved "from self to world" through the morally illuminating literary imagination, Mary offers her compassion to individuals both to whom she is "near" and from whom she is "remote": her benevolence knows "no bounds." And the reader—linked to Mary through affect, if not through a similarity in class,

given the character's privileged position as an aristocrat—may likewise be motivated to move “from self to world,” to cross the barriers that divide, therefore illustrating the ethical possibilities of emotionally resonant reading.

However, the reader also learns that Mary derives personal pleasure from her philanthropy, which would seem to imply that her sympathy stems from self-interest; thus, Wollstonecraft thereby alerts her reader to the egoistic tendency in sympathy and encourages the reader to be discerning in her sympathetic investment. In relieving the poor, for example, Mary feels “gratified, when, in consequence of [giving up her meal], she [is] pinched by hunger” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 10). Similarly, when she is caring for the invalid Henry—her friend and potential lover—the narrator informs us that Mary finds his illness “not alarming,” but “pleasing,” for it gives her “an excuse” to show “him how much she [is] interested about him” (30). Yet, I would claim that the sense of pleasure Mary derives from her helping behaviour does not diminish her benevolence, nor does it imply that her motivation is purely egoistic. As Batson and Shaw have shown, prosocial behavior stems from *both* altruism and egoism, and regardless, the prosocial behaviour is directed towards helping the other. Moreover, Wollstonecraft’s willingness to show Mary’s character as fully human, influenced by genuine sympathy and self-interest, further enlists readerly sympathy. Wollstonecraft therefore provides her reader with a balanced vision of social sympathy—and a well-balanced character—acknowledging, like Hume and Smith, that although sympathy is fundamental to humanity, self-interest is also an undeniable part of human nature.

Wollstonecraft warns of another potential danger of sympathy, for Mary’s compassion begins to threaten her very selfhood, and she comes close to becoming that conventional “decaying sentimental heroine” that Wollstonecraft so assiduously aspires to subvert in her

writings (Johnson, *Cambridge* 196). Thus, Wollstonecraft stresses that her readers remain cognizant of the risk of excessive sympathy, of an over-investment in other's experience, whether that sympathy is for a fictional being or an individual in the real world. Since the reader is encouraged to occupy Mary's being through reading, to adopt her perspective through a kind of sympathetic physicality, the reader's *own* being—if she is undiscerning in her sympathetic involvement—may therefore be threatened as Mary's is. Indeed, that she might alleviate the suffering of others, Mary neglects herself. As the narrator writes:

In order to be enabled to gratify herself in the highest degree, [Mary] practised the most rigid economy, and had such power over her appetites and whims, that without any great effort she conquered them so entirely, that when her understanding or affections had an object, she almost forgot she had a body which required nourishment. (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 14)

Mary becomes so engrossed in her philanthropy that she seems to live only for others and not for herself, thereby running the risk of becoming a nonentity, as might the reader but for Wollstonecraft's masterful employment of a narrative technique that allows the reader both objective distance as well as subjective involvement. Yet the threat to Mary's well-being implicit in her selfless/self-less sympathy—her virtuous generosity of self and her destructive denial of self—is not realized, for Wollstonecraft would not condone a sympathy that tends toward bodily enervation. Indeed, she argues for the exercise of women's minds *and* bodies in her conduct book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787) and in her later *Rights of Woman*—as she does in *Mary*. As Kelly notes, Wollstonecraft recommends physical exercise as “the foundation of mental exercise and vigour, according to contemporary materialist philosophy of the physical, sensory basis of

moral and intellectual being" (*Revolutionary* 30). Moreover, after the abovementioned description of Mary's neglect of her body, the narrator comments that "[t]his habit of thinking, this kind of absorption, gave strength to the passions," which is a Wollstonecraftian red flag, for the passions, according to Wollstonecraft, must be reined in by reason, informed and balanced by rational intellect (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 14). In the same way, the reader's sympathy, her affective engagement, must also be informed by reason and critical awareness, reined in by rationality. Thus, Wollstonecraft provides an intelligent and discerning vision of sympathy, subtly warning of its dangers while championing its social benefits. Through her benevolent heroine, Wollstonecraft shows that ultimately, sympathy—if tempered by a well-fortified mind—will contribute to the greater good and advance our “common humanity.”

Mary's self-education, then, her introspection and critical contemplation, are the sparks that have kindled her sympathetic spirit, and so her continued philanthropy *does not* dissolve into either selfishness or self-lessness and *does* benefit the wider social order. In London, for example, confronted with “vulgarity, dirt, and vice,” Mary attends to the poverty-stricken, education-deprived members of society (45). By exposing her female protagonist to the reality of poverty and social injustice, Wollstonecraft creates “a more ‘authentic’ heroine, a more ‘authentic world for her to inhabit and a more significant political education for her in that world” (Kelly, *Revolutionary* 44). And by immersing her reader in Mary's narrative—which is infused with the realism of Wollstonecraft's own life and experience—Wollstonecraft exposes the reader to the reality of such injustice in her own society. Through her persistent humanitarianism, whereby she “relieve[s] the poor” and becomes “intimate with misery—the misery that rises from poverty and the want of education,” Mary actualizes Wollstonecraft's philosophy of human benevolence and social sympathy (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 46).

Wollstonecraft thus applies her ideal of benevolence to her fiction, encouraging readerly empathic accord with the heroine and thus prompting the reader to imitate such benevolence in her own life. Further, Mary's recognition that much of society's misery stems from a lack of education epitomizes Wollstonecraft's own educational theory, her contention that education is a human right that fosters a more just and virtuous citizenry. Providing for a poor family living in "the upper room in an old mansion-house, which had been once the abode of luxury"—a section of the novella that exposes the "lower classes' subjection to the hegemonic order"—Mary illustrates for the reader that an individual's sympathy can be applied to, and possibly remedy, real-world suffering (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 46, Kelly, *Revolutionary* 49).

Thus, within her affecting fiction, Wollstonecraft incorporates a serious social critique, depicting the real-world suffering that arises from social inequity. Mary, self-educated and therefore endowed with critical awareness, recognizes and seeks to alleviate that suffering sprung from social oppression, attending to this family she has taken under her care not merely through financial support, but through personal effort. The father jobless, the mother dying, and the five children starving, their cheeks sallow and their eyes languid, Mary hires a nurse to attend to the children and, because of her knowledge of medicine—which she has acquired through her self-education—is able "to prescribe for the woman," who is dying of a fever (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 47). Although denied a proper public education, then, Mary has managed to educate herself and accumulate the knowledge necessary to both heal the mother and contribute to the greater good. Her reading has cultivated her sympathy and broadened her sense of moral obligation, just as Wollstonecraft's fiction may do for its readers. By depicting the reality of social oppression within her fiction, Wollstonecraft conveys a sense of political urgency, calling on the attentive and emotionally engaged reader to instigate social change.

Mary is thus the literary realization of Wollstonecraft's philosophical and political contention that the cultivation of a rationally educated and emotionally aware citizenry will create a virtuous society, for in developing her reason and sympathetic feeling, Mary learns to expand her circle of ethical consideration, engaging in humanitarian activities that benefit the wider social order. Wollstonecraft has carefully constructed a sympathetic character whose "various virtues [give] vigour to her genius" and for whom "to pity and relieve [are] the same things"; affect and effect—feeling and response—are inextricably related (29). Sympathy (or pity), for Mary—as for Wollstonecraft—necessarily leads to altruistic action, just as *readily* affect may motivate real-world altruism. Through her intellect-invested and sympathetically-attuned heroine, Wollstonecraft shows that our natural human sympathy—cultivated and enlarged through reading and critical thinking—can serve as a crucial connecting, and corrective, force in society. Mary's self-education, which has been fulfilled in her sympathy-extending philanthropy, has thus transformed her into Wollstonecraft's new woman of sensibility, incorporating reason and emotion, rational intellect and genuine sympathetic feeling. Conscious of the deleterious influence of the ideal of femininity disseminated by the literature of sensibility—which celebrates female weakness and emotional excess—Wollstonecraft offers her antidote in *Mary*, using the very vehicle that corrupted the female mind in the first place: a novel of sensibility. *Mary* is Wollstonecraft's cure, a re-formed sentimental novel that will re-form the female mind, providing its readers with an alternative, autonomous, agentive, and socially active female character worthy of emulation.

**c. The Intersection of Wollstonecraft's Mechanics of Sympathy and the Politics of Affect:  
Mary as the Avatar for Wollstonecraft's Sympathetic Sensibility and Socially Subversive  
Womanhood**

Wollstonecraft therefore revolutionizes the conventional novel of sentiment by marrying affective aesthetics to social protest, cultivating her reader's sympathy while simultaneously addressing gender inequality and critiquing the traditional ideal of womanhood as promulgated by the literature of sensibility. As Wollstonecraft laments in *Rights of Woman*, "woman, weak woman!" has been made "the slave of sensibility" (257). Denied a proper education, women's intellect has been "neglected," and "consequently they [have] become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (305, 177). However, educate women and teach them to reason, "[l]et their faculties have room to unfold, and [their] virtues to gain strength," and they will prove their intellectual capacity and thereby be liberated, both from man and from the fetters of conventional sensibility (145). Through *Mary*, Wollstonecraft shows her readers how this might be achieved. The avatar for Wollstonecraft's revised sensibility, Mary offers the reader a regulative ideal towards which to strive, integrating understanding with true affection, reason with sympathetic feeling, rational intellect with a rich and morally-attuned imagination.

As articulated by Mary, Wollstonecraftian sensibility makes us available to virtue, benevolence, and "'good action"'; it entails "a keen consciousness of self and others, coupled with an equally keen moral sense and capacity to feel" (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 43, Conger, "Sorrows" 25). Sensibility, as expressed by Mary, is a form of agency and social utility; the woman of sensibility stretches her sympathy and "delicacy of feeling" outward, seeking to alleviate suffering through social philanthropy and thereby contributing to the greater good.

Wollstonecraft's heroine therefore instructs the reader in an ethics of compassion. As discussed, Wollstonecraft's vision of social sympathy is based on the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, who argue that sympathy serves a crucial social function, forging community and harmonious living, a view connected to the culture and literature of sensibility, which also substitutes the Hobbesian description of humanity as inherently selfish with one that stresses natural human benevolence. This is the aspect of sensibility that Wollstonecraft preserves, develops, and advances in her fiction, made manifest—as has been seen—in the character of Mary, that sympathy-extending heroine with the “metaphysical turn” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 24). By replacing sensibility’s crippling ideal of femininity with an empowering and socially conscious example of womanhood—represented in the sympathetic character of Mary—Wollstonecraft provides an avenue for positive change. Wollstonecraft’s re-created sensibility is therefore socially and politically oriented, for it encourages the expansion of our human sympathies—which might be directed towards real-world relations—and advances a feminist agenda, imparting an ideal of womanhood that inspires cultivation of mind rather than attenuation of body.

While espousing her socially subversive sensibility, Wollstonecraft simultaneously derides the conventional sensibility that venerates feminine feebleness and frivolity, particularly evident in the parodic character of Eliza, the heroine’s indolent, fashionable, lapdog-loving mother. The epitome of the traditional woman of sensibility, the enervated Eliza has acquired only “a few superficial accomplishments”—a typical female education in dancing, painting, and singing in preparation for the marriage market—and has thus become “a mere machine,” having never had the opportunity to develop her reason or exercise her understanding (5). Consequently, Eliza “readily submits” to her father’s will, “promis[ing] to love, honour, and obey, (a vicious

fool,) as in duty bound” (5). As Wollstonecraft argues in *Rights of Woman*, having been “taught [t]o slavishly . . . submit to their parents,” women “are prepared for the slavery of marriage,” escaping the tyranny of the father only to be enslaved by the tyranny of the husband (295). However, Wollstonecraft maintains that “[t]yrants would have cause to tremble if reason were to become the rule of duty in any of the relations of life” (289). In short, if women were taught to reason, they would not so readily submit, like Eliza, to marrying “vicious fool[s]” (289). But according to the unjust system of ‘things as they are,’ women must bear the “heavy yoke” of marriage, denied a proper education that would cultivate their understanding and forced by a sexist society to be financially dependent on their fathers, brothers, or husbands (*Mary* 18). Wollstonecraft, then, having characterized Eliza—her representative of conventional sensibility—as superficial, submissive, and slavishly dependent, steers her readers’ sympathies *away* from traditional sensibility and *towards* her own reformatory sensibility.

Expertly mocking conventional ideals of womanhood—espoused by the literature of sensibility—Wollstonecraft also satirizes sensibility’s darker tendencies, its emphasis on the desirability of female sickliness and bodily debilitation, in the character of Eliza. Indeed, Eliza, marked by a “sickly, die-away languor,” her voice “but the shadow of a sound,” has “so relaxed her nerves, that she [has become] a mere nothing” (5). As discussed in the preceding chapter, sensibility was informed by nerve theory, which suggested that the finer one’s nerves the finer one’s sensitivity, which itself was indicative of one’s sensibility. Moreover, because sensibility was thought to be a sign of nobility—and was therefore bound up with class distinctions—the lower and middle classes would often *affect* or *perform* sensitivity or weakness as a means of *appearing* aristocratic. Women, as well as aristocrats, were thought to possess more delicate nerves, a trait that was touted as desirable. Thus, taught by society—and in particular by

literature of sensibility, which abounds with “decaying sentimental heroine[s]”—that weakness was their glory, women would aspire to bodily breakdown or corporeal disintegration (Johnson, *Cambridge* 196). In a 1791 review of Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791) for the *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft condemns the sentimental novelists’—specifically, the female sentimental novelists’—“absurd fashion . . . of making the heroine of a novel boast of a delicate constitution; and the still more ridiculous and deleterious custom of spinning the most picturesque scenes out of fevers, swoons, and tears” (370). Indeed, traditional sensibility presents the female body as so fine as to be almost non-existent, forever on the verge of falling apart, perpetually approaching suicide, a view reflected precisely in Wollstonecraft’s portrayal of the “mere nothing” Eliza—and because ridiculed by the author, the reader is taught to oppose rather than imitate such bodily dissolution.

Therefore, according to this conventional view, the ideal woman is a bodiless woman, or darker still, a dead woman, thus Lady Louisa’s proud declaration in Burney’s *Evelina* that she is as “sick as death” and cannot “eat a morsel of dinner” (287). Yet, as noted above, Wollstonecraft points out that sensibility is expressed through tears, faints, fevers, and blushes, that is, it is communicated through the body. In this way, women paradoxically become the representations of everything that is physical. Moreover, equally illogical, although feminine delicacy and bodily weakness were promulgated by the culture and literature of sensibility as sexually appealing, husbands, such as Eliza’s gluttonous husband Edward, would often take up mistresses whose “vulgar dance of spirits” and “ruddy glow of health” they found “more agreeable” than the sickly constitutions—cultivated for the husband’s benefit—of their wives (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 5). Thus, there is a tension between the spiritual bodilessness that is supposed to signal a woman’s sensibility—and enhance her desirability—and the physical, corporeal manifestations of that

sensibility as expressed through tears, rouge cheeks, and swoons. And this tension is exacerbated by the fact that women are taught that weakness signifies beauty, while their husbands spend their evenings with females of the more spirited, vigorous variety.

Wollstonecraft illustrates still another paradox intrinsic to sensibility in the character of Eliza, who *relishes* “those most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation, novels” (6). As Johnson notes, “[f]or females of Eliza’s class who, unlike their ruddy-cheeked tenants, are scarcely permitted bodies at all,” sentimental novels, which are “addressed to the senses,” indulge the sexual feelings and passions that women like Eliza are denied (Johnson, *Sentiments* 51, Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 6). Thus, although women are supposed to be bodiless, sentimental novels encourage them to be over-sexualized by representing scenes of amorous seduction, thereby inciting the passions and inflaming the senses. Wollstonecraft powerfully summarizes the injurious effect of the conventional sentimental novel on the female mind in *Rights of Woman*:

[S]ubjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, [women] 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 plumb[e] into actual vice.

These are the women who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists, who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste,

and draw the heart aside from its daily duties. I do not mention the understanding, because never having been exercised, its slumbering energies rest inactive. (330)

Similarly, Eliza, deprived of an education that would teach her reason, and therefore a slave to her senses, “indulges the caprices of fancy,” reading sentimental novels that excite her passions (*Mary* 6). Although “chaste,” Eliza “make[s] amends for this seeming self-denial” by reading sentimental novels, dwelling “on the love-scenes,” accompanying “the lovers to the lonely arbors,” and “walk[ing] with them by the clear light of the moon,” imagining herself to be the heroine within each tale (6, 7). Women like Eliza read “themselves into sexual scenarios played out between dashing gallants and swooning coquettes” and thus succumb “not just to the seductions of the text but to the images of femininity inscribed in them” (Taylor 72). As Faubert explains, sentimental novels “hypocritically advanced the ideal of a woman who is so chaste that she is almost bodiless . . . but, in reality . . . foster[ed] sexual lust in their female readers” (“Footnotes” 80). Wollstonecraft remedies this problem by creating a fiction that engages her reader’s mind as well as her emotions, a fiction that will teach her reader to think *and* to feel, reining in her reader’s passion by appealing to her intellect (Kelly, “Introduction” xv). Moreover, Wollstonecraft subverts the traditional love plot of the sentimental novel by showing that marriage is no more than “a business deal between families and a prison for female desire,” thus denying her female readers the scenes of amorous seduction that would excite their passions, reforming their minds through her re-formed sentimental novel and her revolutionary, sympathy-inspiring female protagonist (Kelly, *Revolutionary* 44).

Wollstonecraft, through the emotionally affecting aesthetic of sentimental fiction—which she revises according to her reformative agenda—deftly demonstrates the unjust nature of marriage laws, which make women mere ciphers. Mary’s father, settling a dispute that arises

over the estate Mary is to inherit by means of an arranged marriage, treats his daughter as a piece of property to be bartered and bought. Thus, Wollstonecraft here exposes marriage to be no more than legal prostitution—in which, as Wollstonecraft contends in her feminist treatise, women, having little choice in the matter, are often made “convenient slaves,” prostitutes within the husband’s “little haram” (*Rights of Woman* 104, 191). As Mary cries, “I will work . . . do any thing rather than be a slave” (*Mary* 46). As a consequence of a corrupt and sexist society, Mary is bound by a “heavy yoke” to “the man she [has] promised to obey” (18, 20). Mary—representative of Wollstonecraft’s new woman of sensibility, and thus accustomed to independent thought and critical thinking—is overcome by “an extreme horror at taking – at being forced to take, such a hasty step,” that is, at being compelled to marry a man she neither knows nor desires to know (16). Self-aware and socially conscious because self-educated, Mary recognizes the injustice of her marriage, and of marriage laws in general. And the reader, having engaged sympathetically with Mary’s personal narrative through the participatory imagination, having become one with the story world and its heroine, *feels* Mary’s horror. In emphasizing the callousness of Mary’s father, contrasted with Mary’s compassion, Wollstonecraft keeps her readers’ sympathy focused on her heroine. This affective link established between reader and fictive heroine has real-world implications, for the reader, in feeling *with* Mary, may be actuated by affect, moved to seek action addressing such injustice in her own life.

As the archetype for Wollstonecraft’s revolutionary sensibility and socially subversive womanhood, Mary fittingly resists her unjust fate, developing a relationship with the effeminate Henry—whom she meets while staying with the ailing Ann at a hotel in Lisbon “fitted for the reception of invalids”—while still married to her husband (23). Wollstonecraft’s ability to bring innovation and freshness to the commonplace conventions of the sentimental novel, to play on

audience expectations and mould the traditional motifs of the novel of sentiment to her own purposes—thereby shifting meaning and encouraging reform—is particularly evident in her characterization of the sentimental hero, Henry, as it is in her characterization of her subversive heroine. As Kelly asserts, “[r]ather than a ‘romantically’ attractive hero,” Wollstonecraft creates “one that is older, ugly, and intellectual,” “replac[ing] the hero of erotic desire with one of the ‘mind’” (*Revolutionary* 44, 45). Mary, who prefers “[t]he society of men of genius”—since they improve “her faculties”—naturally gravitates to Henry, who “seem[s] a thinker, and deliver[s] his opinions in elegant expressions” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 20). Wollstonecraft thus reshapes the sentimental novel by creating an analytically-oriented female protagonist who, unlike the conventional, superficial sentimental heroine, is attracted to the inner mind rather than the outward frame of the hero. More importantly, Wollstonecraft obfuscates gender boundaries by making Henry the quintessence of the sentimental heroine, and Mary his gallant protector. In blurring the boundaries between male and female, then, Wollstonecraft attempts to achieve through her fiction what she would later advocate for in *Rights of Woman*: to see “the distinction of sex confounded in society” (172). In constructing the relationship between Mary and Henry such that Mary subversively assumes the conventional male role and Henry the conventional female role, Wollstonecraft obscures the traditional distinctions between male and female, showing that gender is not innate, but culturally formed. Thus, Mary, in cultivating a relationship with Henry while still married, flouts convention and demonstrates her transgressive nature, exemplifying Wollstonecraft’s new woman.

While Mary’s “fatal tie,” her undesired marriage, exposes her readers to gender inequities and the injustice of laws pertaining to women as they exist, her relationship with Henry exemplifies that equality between man and woman that might be, a gender equality

Wollstonecraft would later call for in *Rights of Woman*. As the narrator states, “[i]t was an advantage to Mary that,” with Henry, “friendship first possessed her heart; it opened it to all the softer sentiments of humanity”; however, with her husband, no friendship has formed since no time was allowed for mutual affection to gain ground (*Mary* 55). The reader, drawn into the life and experience of the protagonist through the mechanics of narrative affect, feeling what Mary feels through the sympathetic imagination, may better appreciate Mary’s—and her author’s—desire for “the softer sentiments of humanity” in the marriage state, and thus be more receptive to Wollstonecraft’s call for change. Wollstonecraft’s fiction is therefore a powerful prelude to the arguments she would later advance in her political treatises, such as her assertion that a marriage must be based on mutuality and respect, and informed by “the softer sentiments of humanity.” Moreover, one could argue that by first fictionalizing her political agenda before communicating it in polemical prose, Wollstonecraft reveals her preference for the literary form and its ability to convey important ethical truths through the moral imagination. By engaging her readers in an emotionally affecting fictional narrative that reveals the possibility of a fulfilling and mutually satisfying relationship of equals such as exists between Mary and Henry, Wollstonecraft effectively critiques the current state of “tyranny” that defines the relationship between the sexes. Wollstonecraft thus provokes the reader’s sympathy and outrage, employing narrative affect that it might be transfused into the real world to effect necessary change.

However, within Mary’s fictional story world, no such change occurs. Mary—because a woman—remains “caught in a trap, and caged for life” in a union unwanted and unequal (*Maria* 128). Yet, subversive character that she is, Mary defies convention, choosing to receive the sacrament with Henry—despite her marriage to Charles—“as a bond of union which was to extend beyond the grave” (*Mary* 59). As Kelly elucidates, the sacrament here referred to is

“evidently . . . the Eucharist, or holy communion, a ritual consumption of wine and wafer memorializing the last supper of Christ and his disciples, and regarded by some Protestants as a channel of divine grace to the believer” (“Explanatory Notes” 186). Significantly, “the Eucharist was also celebrated as part of a marriage ceremony,” thus implying that Mary, truly transgressive, has defied convention and married one man while still married to another (186). Mary therefore epitomizes Wollstonecraft’s feminist thought, for she acts according to her own desires rather than adhere to sexist social etiquette, and her example inspires the attentive and sympathetically attuned reader to critique and seek to abolish such oppressive sexism in her own society. Yet, because Mary lives in a society that is as of yet unreformed, her socially subversive relationship with Henry is doomed; his impending death confirms this fate and symbolizes the impossibility of any such relationship in an unchanged world.

The weak and dying Henry, supported in his death by the able-bodied Mary, becomes the “decaying sentimental heroine” and Mary the supportive hero as Wollstonecraft, reversing stereotypical gender roles, continues to subvert her readers’ expectations and illustrate her heroine’s unconventionality in terms of the traditional novel of sensibility. And although Mary’s health does threaten to deteriorate as a consequence of her loss—thereby aligning her with traditional sentimental heroines who waste away for love—Mary’s strength of body and mind enable her to rouse herself and once again recover her former fortitude. Yet her resolution is short-lived, for in another twist of sentimental motifs, Mary, upon reuniting with her husband—a reunion, fittingly for Wollstonecraft’s feminist fiction, far from joyous—faints, and her former “disgust return[s] with additional force” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 61). Mary is so acutely aware of the unjustness of such a union that her “body revolts” in an exterior manifestation of her inner indignation (Johnson, “Wollstonecraft’s novels” 198). Correspondingly, the reader, brought into

sympathetic identification with Mary through the literary imagination, may also feel Mary's outrage. Thus, rather than simply delineate the wrongs of woman in polemical prose, Wollstonecraft makes her reader *feel* the injustice of gender oppression through the affecting aesthetic of fiction, absorbing her reader in a story that evokes an empathic responsiveness that may inspire altruistic motivation.

Although forced at last to unite with her husband—since her sexist society gives her no choice—Mary asserts her autonomy and self-sufficiency by demanding one year of solitary travel, free of her husband's unwanted company, thereby temporarily delaying the inevitable union that she, and her author, consider synonymous with servitude. Even when Mary is compelled to return to her husband, “ordinary domesticity is entirely forestalled,” for Mary, an authentic new woman, is unable to affect domestic bliss, and whenever “her husband would take her hand, or mention any thing like love, she would instantly feel a sickness, a faintness at her heart, and wish, involuntarily, that the earth would open and swallow her” (Johnson, “Wollstonecraft’s novels” 198, Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 61). By depicting the everyday injustice faced by the female sex within her story world, by representing the reality of “the oppressed state of women” on her fictional canvas, Wollstonecraft infuses her fiction with verisimilitude, and in so doing, validates the concerns raised therein (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 107). Kelly rightly argues that Wollstonecraft “claims mimetic truth and authority in creating a more authentic picture of ‘things as they are’ for women” (*Revolutionary* 49). Appropriately, then, Wollstonecraft refuses to provide her audience with a happy ending, or a tidy resolution, concluding her fiction with her heroine longing for death, and thereby indicating that the present world—the world depicted within the fictional frame—cannot accommodate the social and political transformations necessary for the emancipation of woman.

Indeed, although Mary persists in her humanitarianism, “establishing manufactories,” dividing her “estate into small farms,” visiting “the sick, support[ing] the old, and educat[ing] the young,” her former health never returns, and her “delicate state” does “not promise long life” (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 62). And “[i]n moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind – She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage*” (62). Mary’s desire for death therefore derives from her awareness of the injustices of an oppressive, patriarchal society utterly hostile to female genius. But in yearning for death, Mary is also yearning for a world that *might* be, one divorced of marriage, which, for Wollstonecraft, symbolizes “the entire system of the degradation, oppression and exploitation of women in the interests of property controlled by men” (Kelly, “Introduction” xvii). Therefore, imprisoned within a sexist society “unfit for” female “genius,” Mary’s longing for death is “not a surrender but . . . a protest,” a radical summons to change, intended to provoke readerly indignation and thereby activate real-world ethical action addressing gender inequity (xvii). Moreover, because *Mary* ends unresolved, it becomes incumbent upon the reader to provide the resolution, and Wollstonecraft has furnished her readers with the means to do so.

By authoring this text, Wollstonecraft has authenticated an alternative female identity worthy of imitation. In creating an unconventional and revolutionary sentimental novel that portrays a progressive and socially active female character endowed with “thinking powers,” Wollstonecraft has imparted to her audience a means to change, an example of how the world for which her heroine can only long may be realized (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 4). In short, Wollstonecraft has equipped her audience with “an agenda that might actually be lived rather than just imagined” (Parke 111). Thus, as Shelley would maintain, the literary artist “beholds the future in the present, and [her] thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest

time,” her creative imagination providing the impetus for transformative action (869). By means of the imagination, then, creative writers orient their readers towards something better by giving a vision of how things *might* be, showing “‘things such as might happen’ in a human life” (Nussbaum, *Justice* 5). The literary imagination, writes Llosa, “transform[s] the impossible into possibility” (40). Therefore, although Wollstonecraft’s heroine will not live to see the reformed society that would accept her genius and afford her the opportunities that, as a woman, she is unjustly denied, her readers, by enacting what her heroine can only envision, may participate in the institution of just such a society.

In denying her readers closure, then, Wollstonecraft encourages collaboration in her transformative agenda, her sympathy-inspiring fiction thereby lending itself to that endless conjecture that Wollstonecraft would later praise in *Rights of Men*: “the most improving exercise of the mind,” Wollstonecraft asserts, “is the restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty”; “[t]hese lively conjectures,” she continues, “are the breezes that preserve the still lake from stagnating” (50). The reader’s “lively conjectures,” her “restless enquiries,” allow for infinite “recuperation” of the novella’s “revolutionary potential,” stimulating self-reflection and critical thinking and, in so doing, prompting prosocial action (Kelly, “Introduction” xxxi). Thus, the indeterminacy of *Mary*’s conclusion, by invoking readerly cooperation and creativity, instigates a movement beyond the novella’s pages whereby the reader provides the resolution in the real world. By thus encouraging her readers to partake in this sympathetic reciprocity, this ethical exchange of feeling that incites transformation, Wollstonecraft achieves her reading revolution.

## Conclusion

### **The Radicalizing Effect of Affect:**

#### **Wollstonecraft's "Immortality"<sup>1</sup>**

Aesthetics and Ethics are one and the same.<sup>2</sup>

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Feeling moves, and feeling moves us.<sup>3</sup>

—Arnold Weinstein, *A Scream Goes Through the House*

The elemental pulse of fiction . . . is still vital.<sup>4</sup>

—Arnold Weinstein, *Recovering Your Story*

"I am . . . persuaded that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation," Wollstonecraft asserts in *Rights of Woman* (183). This "cultivation," this unfolding of heart and mind, may be achieved—as demonstrated in *Mary*—through the art of fiction, which appeals to both feeling and intellect. The imaginative artistry of aesthetic activity simultaneously awakens the reader's sympathy and prompts her to use her cognitive powers to reflect on and attend to the moral possibilities of that prosocial emotion. *Mary*, a study in feeling, illustrates the ethical potential dwelling in fiction, its capacity to cultivate sympathetic feeling and critical consciousness through the moral imagination. In "draw[ing] us out" of ourselves and "hook[ing] us up (imaginatively, emotionally, neurally) into other circuits, other lives," literature forms an "affective bridge" between self and other, allowing us to see the world anew from another's point of view, which in turn ignites ethical illumination and insight (Weinstein, *Scream* xxii,

xxviii, Csengei 46). Wollstonecraft recognized and sought to harness the moral power of the literary imagination in *Mary*, using narrative affect to effect “her revolution in female manners,” a reformation of the female mind she hoped would “reform the world” (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 158). In *Mary*, she utilizes the affecting aesthetic of sensibility—evoking feeling through imaginative writing—to inspire social and political change, using “fictional worldmaking” to remake her own world (Keen, “Temperaments” 298). In praising the “force” of his wife’s “cultivated imagination” in his *Memoirs*, then, Godwin is gesturing to the heart of Wollstonecraft’s genius (125). Just as Wollstonecraft’s “sensibility,” her “luxuriance of imagination,” “determined [Godwin] to a careful development of [his] feelings,” so her sensibility, her “fiction-making imagination,” invites the reader of *Mary* to cultivate her own sympathetic feeling—the very fabric of our existence as social beings—and enjoins her to transform her world (Godwin, *Memoirs* 132, 55, Nussbaum, *Justice* 36).

The reader of *Mary* therefore becomes an agent of change, participating in Wollstonecraft’s reformative vision. In this way, Wollstonecraft cleverly illustrates the ethical efficacy of literature through literature itself. In constructing a character—a “word-wrought projection of something very like a human being”—who is herself a reader and who has been made more sympathetic through her reading, Wollstonecraft demonstrates within her fiction how the reader should respond to her novella (Keen, “Temperaments” 299). *Mary* is a masterful working out of a three-fold operation of imagination, sympathy, and affect: through an “imaginative projection of feeling” Wollstonecraft rouses readerly sympathy, and this felt response to her fiction, this narrative affect, might be translated into real-world, radical change (Poovey 120). *Mary*, then, is a seminal work in the longstanding and far-reaching debate over the function of art in society, clearly espousing the view that literature matters, that its summoning

of sympathy, its evocation of feeling, unfolds to an ethical end. Wollstonecraft, like Smith, argues for the affective and effective function of art, its “capacity to stimulate deep emotional involvement,” and stir our human sympathies, thereby catalyzing “moral transformation” (Wight 157). Sympathy—as demonstrated by Wollstonecraft’s feeling-oriented fiction—is the agent that knits aesthetics to ethics. Therefore, although some critics have claimed that *Mary* is an imperfect work, suggesting that the writing “lack[s]” the “fluency of Radcliffe, the virtuosity of Burney, the tonal mastery of Austen” and that it is not “aware of itself as a text,” “fail[ing]” to thematize “its status as fiction,” this study makes a case for *Mary*’s groundbreaking achievement (Johnson, *Equivocal* 49, Rajan 223, 225). Wollstonecraft, in so skilfully utilizing narrative affect to elicit her reader’s sympathy in *Mary*, invokes “a radical calling towards change,” illuminating how the moral machinery of the imagination and literature’s mechanisms of feeling may be used as vehicles for transformative action (Steiner, *Presences* 143).

An exercise in feeling for the reader, *Mary* makes manifest the moral value of literature, its capacity to spark sympathy, inspire self-reflection, and instigate a critical consideration of the connections between the story world and the real world outside the fictional frame. As Steiner argues, “[w]e cannot touch on the experience of art in our personal and communal lives without touching, simultaneously, on moral issues of the most compelling and perplexing order”; our personal involvement with literature has the potential to shape, furnish, and refine our readiness for real, tangible ethical response in our everyday lives (144). For Wollstonecraft, then, as exhibited in *Mary*, literature is the engine of ethics. Indeed, it is nearly impossible, writes Stephen Arata, “to quarantine artistic from social issues,” the aesthetic from moral questions and concerns; “words on a printed page, artfully arranged,” Arata maintains, “can contribute to significant cultural change” (171). Had Wollstonecraft lived to witness the aesthetic movement

of the late nineteenth century—a prelude to deconstructionism—whose “rallying cry,” “art for art’s sake,” conveyed its conviction that “[t]he end of a work of art is simply to exist in its formal perfection,” she would surely have taken her place on the opposite side of the debate (Abrams 4). Although “[a]rt for art’ is a tactical slogan, a necessary rebellion against philistine didacticism and political control,” if “pressed to its logical consequences,” the notion that “[a]ll art is quite useless” denies the moral worth of meaning (Steiner, *Presences* 143, Wilde, “Preface” 42). To argue for the ethical value of art is not to say that it should be employed as a tyrannical tool to dictate to the reader a set of moral precepts but to acknowledge that through engaging with art we may learn something new about the human condition, about ourselves, and about our world, and thereby become morally altered through meaning-making. As René Wellek contends, “[i]f literature has nothing to say about our minds and cosmos, about love and death, about humanity in other times and other countries, literature loses its meaning” (49). The purpose of this study has been to challenge critical trends that reject any moral reading of a text and re-illuminate, by means of Wollstonecraft’s fiction, the marvel, and “ethical import,” of meaning (Steiner, *Presences* 144).

In a contemporary setting permeated by poststructuralist thought—which insists that humanity “lives in a prison house of language that has no relation to reality”—a radical re-assertion of literature’s capacity to speak of us and for us, to convey and examine human consciousness and investigate the complexity of human life and emotion, is essential (43). As Patai and Corral argue, a renewed respect for literature’s “ability to give memorable expression to the vast variety of human experience” is required in academia (14). If we grant the poststructuralist argument that all language is arbitrary, we are admitting that we have no claim on the meaning of what we say; we are denying the vital relationship between language and

individual consciousness. Moreover, one could argue that there is no arbitrariness in our *use* of language, for there is nothing arbitrary about which signs we choose to use in combination with other signs in order to express our inner thoughts and feelings. This view that our use of the language system is not contingent or accidental but deliberate and based on our own unique relationship with language affirms its power to communicate consciousness. As Raymond Tallis asserts, “[s]elf-knowledge and self-awareness, the individual and collective sense of self at the highest level are mediated through language” (126). “The intimate relation between language and consciousness and self-consciousness,” Tallis claims, “works both ways. Not only does language seem to be the bearer of most of human consciousness, but linguistic acts, under the usual conditions, seem to be uniquely the product of consciousness, of deliberation and voluntary choice” (127). An understanding of language as the embodiment of our human particularity gives us agency; it gives us the individual, which is the locus of our ethics. It is therefore imperative that we reclaim literature’s ability to capture consciousness, to speak the self, that we re-affirm the “meaning of meaning” and reinvest the study of literature with an understanding of its connection to human life and experience, to the real world out there (Steiner, *Presences* 4). Literature, in Weinstein’s words, “remakes the world” and “stuns us with a larger apprehension of human affairs and our place within them”; it instigates a movement from “meaning to meaningfulness” that can be both personally and politically valuable (Weinstein, *Scream* xxix, Steiner, *Presences* 4).

Wollstonecraft, writing in the late eighteenth century, was conscious of the vital link between the personal and the political and gave it clear expression in her fiction, in which she appeals to the reader’s private emotions, to her inward feelings, in order to inspire political change. Wollstonecraft demonstrates that the inner experience of affect may effect real-world

transformation. Thus, as Cora Kaplan comments, “Wollstonecraft’s urgent plea to her own and future generations of women” to “train and exercise their ‘understanding’ . . . is only one strand in her legacy for twentieth-century feminism” (251). The other strand of Wollstonecraft’s legacy is her “opinion that ‘the most perfect education . . . is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart’” (251). Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on “the role of ‘the heart,’” on the function “of affect . . . in the reformation and liberation of woman,” speaks to the depth and breadth of her political vision and to the innovation of her thought and writings, for she insists on the equal importance of mind and feeling, cognition and emotion, in the reformation of womanhood and in the creation of a just and humane society (251). Moreover, she illustrates that literature, which exercises the moral imagination, is the most effective means of cultivating intellectually capable and emotionally aware, rationally competent and sympathetically attuned, citizens—a view she cogently communicates in *Mary*. Within her affecting fiction, Wollstonecraft demonstrates sympathy’s benevolent operation in society, and, by means of her mechanisms of feeling, her sympathy-inspiring literary techniques, she evokes her reader’s emotion; her sympathy thus awakened, the reader is induced to extend this moral feeling into real-world relations, thereby becoming a co-creator of change in enacting Wollstonecraft’s social and political vision.

This study proves the veracity of Woolf’s prophetic declaration that “one form of immortality is [Wollstonecraft’s] undoubtedly,” for through her writing, Wollstonecraft remains “active and alive,” speaking through her fiction and contributing to contemporary conversations on imagination, sympathy, and affect (477). To read *Mary* through the lens of the moral imagination, to engage with the novella sympathetically and emotively, is to be “altered . . . in some subtle yet radical manner,” and this is the power of affect, for as Weinstein maintains,

“feeling moves, and feeling moves us” (Steiner, “Humane Literacy” 10, Weinstein, *Scream* xxi).

Wollstonecraft’s capacity to affect her present and future readers through *Mary*, to radicalize them through feeling, clearly establishes both the worth of her fiction and the “immortality” of her influence.

## Notes

### Introduction

#### **Revolution, Radicalism, and Rights:**

#### **Progressive Politics and Reformative Fiction**

1. Kelly, *Revolutionary* 223.

2. Woolf, “Mary Wollstonecraft” 477.

3. Kelly here echoes the 1960s feminist Carol Hanisch’s famous phrase. Significantly, however, Kelly notes that “[l]ong before the phrase gained wide circulation in the 1970s, Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries believed that ‘the personal is the political’ because politics, or relations and institutions of power, condition personal identity, social relationships, and life chances for everyone” (“Introduction” ix).

4. As Michelle Faubert explains, Wollstonecraft also uses the terms “sensibility” and “sentiment” interchangeably in her *Female Reader* (“Footnotes” 11). However, Wollstonecraft does sometimes differentiate between the two terms. For example, in *Mary, A Fiction*, she uses the term “sensibility” as “indicative of a genuine and noble characteristic,” and in *Rights of Woman*, she uses the term “sentiment” “with aversion,” suggesting that it signifies “a false sensation and givenness to celebrate weakness” (11).

5. Notably, Godwin criticized Wollstonecraft’s polemical work for its “rigid[ness] and somewhat amazonian [sic] temper” (*Memoirs* 129-30).

6. Although it appears ironic that Wollstonecraft—the mother of feminism—uses such words as “feminine” and “effeminate” in a derogatory fashion, her use of these words is based on her perception of woman as she currently is in Wollstonecraft’s society, that is, a subjugated being

educated to be weak, irrational, servile, and overly emotional. As Wollstonecraft writes, “[m]en complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of [the female] sex,” but she asserts that these negative qualities are “the natural effect of ignorance,” of being denied an education equal to that of man, one which cultivates reason (*Rights of Woman* 126). Wollstonecraft’s disapprobation, then, is for the cultural *construction* of femininity, not for woman as she naturally is and might be if she were given a proper education.

7. In his “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Wilde asserts that “[t]o reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (41). He maintains that “[n]o artist has ethical sympathies” and that “[a]ll art is quite useless” (41, 42). Similarly, in “The Decay of Lying” (1889), he argues that “[a]rt never expresses anything but itself” (253).

## Notes

### Chapter One

#### **The Ethics of Sympathy: Contemporary Cross-Disciplinary**

#### **Conversations on Imagination, Sympathy, and Affect**

1. Nussbaum, *Knowledge* 166.
2. Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 1.
3. Dr. Neil McArthur (Department of Philosophy), in his lecture, “Hatred, Evil and the Moral Value of Negative Emotions”—presented at “The Affect Project’s” symposium, “Expressing Emotion,” on May 2, 2012 at the University of Manitoba—also argues that negative emotions have moral value.
4. Unfortunately, such individuals, like Macbeth, who defy the necessary limits and very feelings of humanity—that “milk of human kindness”—to gain power over others, are all-too-familiar and all-too-common in real life (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* I.v.15). Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and presently, Bashar al-Assad and Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, are just a few examples of such individuals. Drawing on emotion awakened by reading of such human transgression, one may be mobilized to act against corresponding transgression in real life.
5. A recent article by Misty Harris, “Book Characters’ Lives Can Affect Our Own, Studies Show,” is relevant here, for it details current empirical evidence that has proven that narrative affect can bring about actual changes in readers’ behaviour in real-world relations (*Postmedia News* May 14, 2012). Harris explains that researchers Geoff Kaufman—a post-doctoral researcher at Tiltfactor Laboratory at Dartmouth College—and Lisa Libby—an assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University—conducted six studies with an estimated five-

hundred people to show that “adopting a protagonist’s feelings, beliefs and internal responses as one’s own—a phenomenon dubbed ‘experience-taking’—was linked with similar behaviours in real life” (1). For example, their studies proved that individuals “who read a story about someone overcoming obstacles in order to vote were more likely to cast a ballot in a real election days later” (1). Harris cites Kaufman, who concludes that the study shows that there is “‘more than just entertainment value to narratives: Having these authentic experiences in a book can, at least temporarily, be transformative’” (3). Libby comments that narrative affect can “‘be very powerful,’” for it expands the reader’s “‘horizons,’” encouraging her “‘to relate to social groups that maybe [she] wouldn’t have otherwise’” (3).

6. Some may argue that a reader’s imagination may be stretched in an immoral direction, which is a valid concern. However, if the individual has exercised her imagination and thereby cultivated her critical capacities through reading literature, she will be better prepared to recognize when she is being asked to sympathize with an unethical work or an immoral character or narrator. Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) provides a useful example of just such an unreliable character/narrator. Although *encouraged* to empathize with the immoral protagonist/narrator Humbert Humbert, the educated reader is unlikely to do so. Yet, this lack of sympathetic identification with the protagonist does not negate the moral value of the aesthetic activity, for the reader’s sense of indignation or outrage in response to Nabokov’s unsympathetic protagonist/narrator may instigate important evaluative judgments and a critical contemplation of the complexity of the human condition, of the reality of humankind’s darker tendencies. James Wood comments, in reference to Humbert Humbert, that “[w]e know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator’s

unreliability. A process of authorial-flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator,” and, simultaneously, how to read the world (5).

7. Current research at the University of Manitoba by Dr. Adam Muller (Department of English, Film, and Theatre) with Dr. Andrew Woolford (Department of Sociology), Dr. Struan Sinclair (Department of English, Film, and Theatre), and Dr. Katherine Starzyk (formerly Department of Psychology) is pertinent to this discussion of the efficacy of story, its capacity to engender morally responsible action through empathy. Working with testimonies from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the researchers are investigating how Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality technologies can be used in a museum setting to allow individuals to become immersed in the story worlds of survivors of the Canadian Indian Residential School system. Researchers anticipate that this immersion experience in the survivors’ “narratives of suffering” will evoke empathy and understanding as the virtual experience of another’s real suffering makes one care about that suffering “in ways that promote healing and reconciliation.” Muller stated the following during his lecture, “Spatializing Suffering, Exhibiting Rights: Affect and Atrocity in the Modern ‘Ideas’ Museum”: “We hypothesize that this kind of immersion is the sort of thing that will, in fact, not only make people more aware of the Indian Residential school system, but more likely to seek reconciliation and more likely to seek justice” (“Critical Conversations: The Idea of a Human Rights Museum” September 26, 2012). Similarly, for the reader of a work of literature, such as, for example, Wollstonecraft’s *Mary*, by becoming sympathetically immersed in the heroine’s experience and her story world, the reader may be encouraged to care about the suffering of other women and seek remedial action addressing such suffering in her own society.

8. According to Hume, it is our inherent sympathy for our fellow human beings that allows for our discernment between right and wrong actions and that encourages sociability and social harmony. He is one among a number of Scottish Enlightenment Moral Sense thinkers—such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Smith—who advances sympathy as a cohesive force in society.

9. Related to this concern about the atrophy of affect is the problem of sympathy fatigue, the possibility that the reader may become indifferent—her sympathy exhausted—as a consequence of being inundated by representations of others' suffering. Although some readers may experience an atrophy of affect by being over-saturated with literature that encourages sympathetic responsiveness, others will be activated to action by the affective experience of vicariously enduring another's pain or suffering, their sense of outrage catalyzing ethical response in the real world. Therefore, while sympathy fatigue is a legitimate concern, this study would argue that it is better to risk a reader feeling emotionally exhausted by the sympathetic reading experience than to avoid this possibility altogether by ceasing to read emotionally evocative literature.

10. George Steiner's concern that the reader may care more for the character in the novel than for the victim in real life is relevant here, for Steiner warns that "a trained, persistent commitment to the life of the printed word, a capacity to identify deeply and critically with imaginary personages or sentiments, diminishes the immediacy, the hard edge of actual circumstance" ("Literacy" 5). "We come to respond more acutely to the literary sorrow," Steiner continues, "than to the misery next door" (5). Therefore, "the cry in the poem may come to sound louder, more urgent, more real than the cry in the street outside," and the "death in the novel may move us more potently than the death in the next room" ("Gentlemen" 61). However, as suggested earlier, readers are aware of the fictionality of what they read. When a reader cares

deeply for a fictional character, her sympathy is not directed towards an imaginary being but towards a similar being in the real world. Of course, this outcome is not assured; the reader may sympathize with a character and then carry on with her own life, but there is always the possibility that by virtue of the perspective gained, the reader may extend her compassionate concern into the real world.

11. For support for this claim, see the comments in note 5 on Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby's research on the real-world implications of readerly affect, reported on by Misty Harris in "Book Characters' Lives Can Affect Our Own, Studies Show."

12. This notion of readerly reflection accords with Marcel Proust's understanding of "the literary text as an 'optical instrument' through which the reader becomes a reader of his or her own heart" (Nussbaum, *Knowledge* 47).

13. The narrative technique employed by Wollstonecraft in *Mary*, free indirect discourse, is particularly efficacious in achieving readerly sympathy.

## Notes

### Chapter Two

#### **The Ethics of Aesthetics: Eighteenth-Century Reflections**

#### **on the Imagination, Sympathy, and Affect**

1. White, *Rights* 1.

2. Shelley, *Defence* 871.

3. Notably, Blake and Shelley were both personally connected to Wollstonecraft. W. Clark Durant explains that Blake was more than likely one of Wollstonecraft's close friends, "as there is no doubt that they met frequently," both being part of the radical publisher Joseph Johnson's literary circle ("Preface" xxxii). In fact, Blake, apparently an admirer of Wollstonecraft's work, "made engravings for two of [her] books—*Original Stories from Real Life*, and *Elements of Morality*" (xxxii). Moreover, "Blake's poem *Mary*, in the Pickering MS., is [likely] based on the character and life" of Wollstonecraft (xxxii-xxxiii). Shelley too had both an intellectual and personal affiliation with Wollstonecraft. In a dedication to his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley—Wollstonecraft's daughter—he writes the following of his wife's mother:

They say that thou were lovely from thy birth,  
 Of glorious parents, thou aspiring child;  
 I wonder not—for one then left this earth  
 Whose life was like a setting planet mild,  
 Which clothed thee in the radiance undefiled  
 Of its departing glory; still her fame  
 Shines on thee, through the tempests dark and wild

Which shake these latter days; and thou canst  
claim

The shelter, from thy Sire, of an immortal name.

(qtd. in Durant, "Preface" xxxiv-xxxv)

Shelley was also a fierce admirer of Godwin, Wollstonecraft's husband; his *Queen Mab* is described by David Damrosch and Kevin J.H. Dettmar as "a Godwinian dream vision" (815).

4. Shelley and Wordsworth's assumption of this elevated position based on their imaginative prowess and on their belief in the imagination as a moralizing force may incite a resistance similar to that which may be raised by my claim for the moralizing potential of literary sympathy. However, Shelley and Wordsworth are not assuming the mantle of moral guide, advancing in their poetry a moral dictate to be slavishly followed—a concept inherently at odds with the revolutionary spirit of Romanticism—but inducing the reader to be made new by the imaginative encounter with a vision rich in moral possibility. As I have argued, it is not that imaginative writers become the moral compass for their readers, but that the reader, in expanding her ethical awareness, becomes her *own* moral guide, exercising her critical and sympathetic capacities and developing her ability to make appropriate moral judgments.

5. To elaborate on the previous note, I am not suggesting that the literary artist—for example, Shelley, who cruelly left his pregnant wife to elope with a younger woman—should *teach* the reader how to be moral by personal example. Rather, I am claiming that, by re-creating the world anew on a fictional canvas or in a poetic landscape and presenting it as it *ought* to be, the literary artist makes normative statements that challenge the reader to mine her own inner resources for means to achieve the envisioned possibility. Normative statements—such as, "We ought to be

better citizens of the world,” “We ought to become more sympathetically attuned to the experiences of others,” “We ought to read literature as a means to developing our sympathetic capacities”—prompt the reader to develop her critical competency and human sympathy and to make her *own* evaluative judgments that may give rise to moral insight. Therefore, the reader is not encouraged to adopt the literary artist’s values as her own, but to develop her own moral consciousness through an imaginative engagement with the literary work, which may inspire the reader to use her cognitive powers to envisage a more just and compassionate society.

6. Notably, Smith, unlike Coleridge, does not distinguish between “imagination” and “fancy.” While Smith uses the terms synonymously, Coleridge differentiates between the imagination, which he reveres as an echo of the divine, and fancy, which he defines as “no other than a mode of Memory” (*Biographia Literaria* 634).

7. Significantly, it was not only men but also women who advanced this dangerous ideal of womanhood, which Wollstonecraft recognized. For example, in a 1791 review of Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791) for the *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft condemns the female sentimental novelists’ “absurd fashion . . . of making the heroine of a novel boast of a delicate constitution; and the still more ridiculous and deleterious custom of spinning the most picturesque scenes out of fevers, swoons, and tears” (370).

8. Although in a letter to her sister Everina on March 22, 1797 Wollstonecraft refers to her first novella as “an imperfect sketch” and “a crude production” that she would “not very willingly put in the way of people whose good opinion, as a writer, [she would] wish for,” her radical husband Godwin—an adept and notable writer—admired and respected the novella (*Letters* 405, 404). Indeed, he maintained that if Wollstonecraft “had never produced any thing else,” *Mary* “would serve . . . to establish the eminence of her genius” (*Memoirs* 42).

9. Although *Mary* ends with the heroine longing for death, her desire for death may be interpreted as a form of social protest, summoning the reader to read beyond the novella's pages and enact the political change for which Mary can only yearn. Wollstonecraft does not ask her readers to imitate her heroine's desire for death but her cultivation of mind and body and her sympathetic emotion—as expressed in her humanitarian efforts—her example of a re-formed womanhood that is necessary to social transformation.

## Notes

### Chapter Three

#### **Revolutionary Writing and Recuperative Reading:**

##### **The Politics of Sympathy in *Mary, A Fiction***

1. Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 243.
2. Galeano, “In Defence of the Word” qtd. in McKegney 102.
3. Wollstonecraft expresses her abhorrence of feminine delicacy in *Rights of Woman*, in which she argues that “sedentary employments render the majority of women sickly – and false notions of female excellence make them proud of this delicacy, though it be another fetter, that by calling the attention continually to the body, cramps the activity of the mind” (195). “Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are,” Wollstonecraft laments, “consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex” (144).
4. Wollstonecraft was among the novelists in the 1780s developing the technique of free indirect discourse, and she refined the technique further in *Maria* (Kelly, “Introduction” xx). Thus, although the narrative technique is usually associated with Jane Austen, Wollstonecraft was using it in the 1780s, long before Austen wrote. George Eliot and Virginia Woolf are among the later writers who would utilize and develop the technique, recognizing, like Wollstonecraft and Austen, its ability to “represent the full affective and intellectual potential of female subjects” (xx).
5. The phrase, ‘things as they are,’ comes from Godwin’s novel, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). It refers to what Godwin perceives to be the unjust state of

his society, and he therefore calls for radical reform through his novel—as Wollstonecraft does through her novella—which is a fictionalized version of his political treatise, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793).

6. Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, like Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, is a kind of “fictionalized” life-narrative, casting the author's “account of social injustice” (Harding 449).

7. This extension of sympathy to various classes is traditionally a great concern of the novel of sensibility. However, as discussed in previous chapters, this fellow-feeling was often affected and not actually acted upon by individuals in Wollstonecraft's society. Thus, in contrast, Wollstonecraftian sensibility advances genuine sympathy and the active extension of that sympathy to the wider social order.

## Notes

### Conclusion

#### The Radicalizing Effect of Affect: Wollstonecraft's "Immortality"

1. Woolf, "Mary Wollstonecraft" 477.
2. Wittenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* qtd. in Schellekens 145.
3. Weinstein, *Scream* xxi.
4. Weinstein, *Recovering* 13.

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