



Who is at the helm? Mary Wollstonecraft's contribution to the romantic construct of the imagination

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Abstract

In my essay I pursue the line of inquiry which has recently been proposed by scholars who have reconstructed the historical context of Wollstonecraft's feminism to bring into sharper focus what can be seen as consistent motives of her thought. Starting out from the thesis of Barbara Taylor that Wollstonecraft's feminism was deeply rooted in the egalitarian theology of Radical Protestantism (Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminist imagination* Cambridge University Press, 2003) I will argue that her brief career shows how, in her analysis of the hierarchy of the cognitive faculties, first she redefined reason by ascribing to it the power of intuitive apprehension, and eventually she replaced reason with imagination as the distinctive attribute of the human mind. Positioning herself—through Price's theology and moral philosophy—in the Platonic and pagan as well as Christian Neo-Platonic traditions, she arrived several years before Wordsworth or Coleridge not only at an intuition of the creativity of human thinking but at a definition of the imagination as the supreme mental faculty. As a result, in some emotionally highly charged passages of her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), she constructed her own version of early Romanticism in England. These passages can be read side by side with passages of epiphany in Wordsworth's 1805 *Prelude* as the most powerful examples of the imagination leading through an investment in the quotidian to an apprehension of immortality.

Keywords Enlightenment · Romanticism · Reason · Sensibility · Imagination · Neo-Platonism · Rational Dissent

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Introduction

In his comprehensive narrative of the construction of the Romantic imagination, *Creative imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (1981), which includes the fruitful exchange of ideas between Britain and Germany, James Engell emphasises the continuity between Enlightenment and Romanticism: “Enlightenment created the idea of the imagination, [...] its embryonic phase, its youth—everything except its fullest maturity—occurred in the eighteenth century.” The process can be defined as the history of successive attempts to find a middle course between “rigid empiricism and rampant rationalism” so that the idea of the dignity of reason could be preserved without repressing the emotional impulses of the human mind or compromising the faith in a transcendent deity. In Engell’s analysis it was Shaftesbury whose return to the Platonic traditions determined the direction of the search for a synthesis of the faculties of the mind in the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury “revived Platonism not only by keeping alive the work of the Cambridge Platonists [...] but also by turning directly to Plato and the earlier neo-Platonists [...] and established a unified sensibility, a combination and harmony not only of aesthetic, intellectual, and moral impulses but also of emotion and epistemology” (Engell, 1981, pp. 1, 2, 22–3).¹

Since the time Engell published his by now classic study, scholarship has foregrounded a hitherto marginalised, specifically British theological strand in the later Enlightenment, the thought of Rational Dissent, which has been by now integrated into the configuration of the diverse intellectual impulses reconstructed by Engell, and, in consequence, the significance of some thinkers of the 1790s has been made visible. If positioned in that context, Mary Wollstonecraft can also be seen not only as an advocate of equal rights for women in education but also as an important link between Shaftesbury and the British Romantics.

It has been established for some time by now that Wollstonecraft’s feminism was inspired by the egalitarian theology of radical Protestantism (see Taylor, 2003). This has been specified by recent research. In her essay of 2021 “Radicalism, religion, and Mary Wollstonecraft” Susan Hutton explored the influence of Richard Price’s rational political and moral philosophy on Wollstonecraft’s radical political views. In her book of 2017 *Eighteenth-century dissent and Cambridge Platonism* Louise Hickman has integrated Wollstonecraft into the history of the last phase of British Enlightenment, her narrative contains a lengthy consideration of the “distinctly Platonic-Priceian hue” of Wollstonecraft’s concept of reason, and a reconstruction of the evolution of Wollstonecraft’s religious thought in the survey of the “Platonic-Rational Dissenting strand of theological reason” and its associative natural theology.

¹ The same topic, the transition between Enlightenment and Romanticism was discussed by Jacob Risinger in his book *Stoic Romanticism and the ethics of emotion* published in 2021. Risinger’s focus is totally different, he is interested in the formative influence Stoicism had on the history of the transition. It is, however, very interesting that in 2021 Wollstonecraft has a fully integrated presence in the narrative, she is defined as an early Romantic, whose thought constitutes an important link between Shaftesbury and Wordsworth. In his own context, Risinger presents Wollstonecraft’s attempt to coordinate reason and affect (i.e. judgment and sentiment)—discussed in the present essay as well—as a response to one of the most pressing challenges of her time: Stoicism becomes „a complement to the work of sympathy, a prompt for judgment that moderates rather than overrides the claim of sentiment” in Wollstonecraft’s thought (Risinger, 2021, p. 28).

In my present essay I focus on Hickman's contention: "Wollstonecraft was crucial for the emergence of later romantic conceptions of the imagination and paying the development of her thought greater attention points towards the evolution of a theology of nature with a profound commitment to the contemplation of the natural world" (Hickman, 2017, p. 156). I mean to show that as far as the central issue of her philosophy is concerned, her ("Platonic-Priceian") concept of reason as a faculty capable of recognizing the perfection of the divine mind and thus of apprehending moral rectitude, she was a typical philosopher of the Enlightenment. Positioning herself—through Price's theology and moral philosophy—in the Platonic and pagan as well as Christian Neo-Platonic traditions, however, she redefined Enlightenment reason. At the end of her career, she proposed not only that "feelings become an integral part of the truths she wishes to convey" (Poovey, 1984, p. 86), or that reason "often generates or gives way to emotions" (Hickman, 2017, p. 175), but she intuited the creativity of human thinking. Going beyond the stance of Price she arrived at a conception of the imagination as the distinctive human faculty which can synthesise the intellectual, moral, and sentimental impulses of the mind and arrive at an understanding of "the trinity of the good, true, and beautiful" which "at the bottom [are] one" (Engell, 1981, p. 23). In consequence, she readjusted her attitude to nature, and, in her *Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), she composed the first verbal landscapes in English Romanticism in which the sensible world is "a moving image of eternity" (*Timaeus* 37D), i.e. the natural landscape is indicative of the presence of the One.

Wollstonecraft's first writing in which the primary concern of her philosophical inquiry, the growth of the mind and the development of moral judgment, is directly addressed is *A vindication of the rights of men* (1790). Here, in the name of reason, she vehemently attacks Edmund Burke's "infantile sensibility" expressed in his indictment of passions let loose during the course of the French Revolution, and she famously asserts: "reason [...] must be the director of the whole host of passions," it "must hold the rudder, or, let the wind blow which way it list, the vessel will never advance smoothly to its destined port" (Wollstonecraft, 1993, pp. 60, 31).

The quotation of the symbolic image—an echo of Plato's mythical hymn of the soul in *Phaedrus* 243E–257 (Zaw, 1998, p. 99)—shows how very deeply Wollstonecraft's thought was imbedded in contemporary thought. Plato described the soul figuratively as a chariot driven by two horses, one of them "noble," being the soul's (erotic) desire to ascend toward a vision of ultimate truth, and the other "ignoble," representing "passions," pulling the chariot toward the visible and degenerating into "appetite." The reins which coordinate the contrary inclinations of the steeds, are held by the charioteer, "intelligence," which is "most akin to the divine" (Benjamin Jowett's translation).

By the time she wrote the *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft must have read Richard Price's *A review of the principal questions in morals* whose third edition came out in 1787. Here, very much in the same context, i.e. in the discussion of the hierarchy of the cognitive faculties, Price also uses the image of the "vessel of life" to which the passions and the instincts are the sail and wind respectively, whereas the rudder is held by reason: "What we are to study then is not to eradicate our passions [...] but to keep reason vigilant and immovable at the helm, and to render them [the passions

and instincts] more easily governable by it and more absolutely ministerial to it” (Price, 1787, pp. 391–2). It may be assumed that some twenty-five years later Keats and Percy Shelley will have the same vessel in mind when they speculate about the nature of the use and truth of art. In October 1817, when he was trying to finish Book IV of *Endymion*, in his letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats says: “A long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder.” Somewhat later, early in 1819, Percy Shelley rounded off Act II of *Prometheus Unbound* with Asia’s song about the itinerary of a boat which here is conducted by the imagination driven on by erotic desire:

My soul is an enchanted Boat.
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float.
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing.
And thine doth like an Angel sit.
Beside the helm conducting it.
While all the winds with melody are ringing. *Prometheus Unbound* II. V. 72–7.)

The valorisation of the imagination in the Romantic anatomy of the mind—the imagination taking over the place at the helm—is anticipated by Wollstonecraft who should consequently be seen as a link between Richard Price’s theology of reason and the theology of nature of the Romantics.

Rational dissent

The term Rational Dissent is used to identify the most radical form of Protestant Nonconformism which emerged in England in the second half of the eighteenth century as a result of a search by the descendants of 17th century Puritans/Calvinists as well as by Anglican divines—many of them highly qualified scientists at the same time—for a way to reconcile the apparently all-inclusive scientific definition of nature on the one hand, and faith in a transcendent God on the other. Theirs was a religion of revelation but their divines were first and foremost committed to the principle of *sola scriptura* (Hickman, 2017, p. 20). Their two foundation principles were the all sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures and the right of judgement each individual claimed in the interpretation of them. They maintained that theology was to be purified of all that was not compatible either with reason or the Scriptures, so that it could become the foundation of “a holy alliance of science and religion” (Willey, 1950, p. 168). Starting out from the thesis that there is no confirmation to be found in the Scriptures for the concept of the Holy Trinity, Rational Dissenters rejected it as an article of faith, and jettisoned all that no rational explanation could elucidate, and eventually what remained was “only what [was] warranted by reason and Scripture” (Price, 1816, p. 96).

The anti-Trinitarians, soon to be called Unitarians, together with the other dissenting denominations, had a profound belief in the constitutional settlement of the Glorious Revolution (Holt, 1952, p. 76), but claimed social and political equality with the Anglican believers. The 1689 Toleration Act granted freedom of worship to

Nonconformists, although put them under severe restrictions in education and civil life. Ten years later, targeting a small group among the Nonconformists, the Parliament accepted the Blasphemy Act which criminalised the denial of Trinity whether in the form of Arianism (denial of the consubstantiality of God and the Son, the Son created by the Father as an instrument for the creation of the world) or Socinianism (denial of the essential Divinity of Christ).

At the end of the century, in 1787–1796, national politics was dominated by the campaign for the repeal of the restrictive acts of the end of the seventeenth century (Ryan, 1997, p. 27). The arguments used in the campaign were motivated by opposition to both Church and State: “[r]eligious nonconformity in the late eighteenth century was associated with a broad and fairly consistent political identity: parliamentary reform for a more equal representation, [...] support of the American colonies, and opposition to the war with revolutionary France” (White, 2006, p. 9). In the context of my present inquiry, it is important to remember that the Unitarians were the only organized religion which supported all-inclusive religious equality and that in their radicalism the Unitarians went as far as to open for the first time the ministry of religion to women (Holt, 1952, pp. 38, 245).

Despite the effort on the part of the establishment to constrain the influence of Rational Dissent, by the middle of the eighteenth century it was very much in evidence in the contemporary theological and political disputes. The most significant representatives, the preacher, scientist, and social philosopher, Joseph Priestley, and the mathematician, religious and moral philosopher, Richard Price shared a Calvinist background, they were trained at Dissenting Academies, and eventually, as a result of their search for a form of Christianity compatible with the theses of natural philosophy, they both arrived at an anti-Trinitarian position: Priestley embraced Socinianism, Price, on the other hand, became an Arminian.

The Rational Dissenters, prompted by the advance made by the sciences and the ascendancy of the democratic platform in the American colonies and later on in France, entertained millennial hopes in the final decades of the eighteenth century. In *The Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) Priestley says: “The gross darkness of that night which has for many centuries obscured our holy religion, we may clearly see, is past; the morning is opening upon us” (qtd. in Willey, 1950, p. 189). Similarly, in his 1789 sermon, “A discourse on the love of our country,” the famous toast celebrating the 101th anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, Price attributed the triumph of the forces of liberty over despotism to the triumph of reason when he said: “I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience” (Price, 1991, p. 195). Priestley as well as Price, and their numerous sympathisers, believed that the new American and French constitutions would restore the purity of the constitution put into effect in Britain in 1788. Their millennial hopes were shared by the anarchist William Godwin and the young poets, William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge among others.

Bridging the gap between reason and affect

Price himself died before he could have seen the shattering of his hopes. The retribution unleashed by the Jacobins in the name of justice and liberty, the atrocities in 1793–94 that took possession of the streets in Paris suggested that “the morning” anticipated by Priestley was a long way ahead, and that reason is not a strong enough safeguard against the aggressive instincts of man. From the second half of the 1790s the anxiety of some of the Rational Dissenters became a general concern: a way should be found to connect reason as a guide to the recognition of moral imperatives and the affective drives of man to contain irrational passion in human conduct. Dissenters, whether lapsed Anglicans, like Wollstonecraft and Coleridge, or coming from Calvinist backgrounds, like Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, and William Godwin, all were deeply concerned with the reinstatement of links between affect and reason, human desire and, what was little more than an abstraction, the Supreme Mind. Coleridge eventually embraced Anglican orthodoxy, Godwin, a Sandemanian turned Socinian, ended up as an avowed atheist, but by 1798, the year when the “anti-Godwinian” *Lyrical Ballads* appeared (Willey, 1950, p. 212), he modified his own Godwinism by allowing for the role of the emotions in moral judgment.² Priestley consistently upheld his Unitarian theology: he rejected the idea of any compromise with orthodoxy and consistently preserved his deep faith in the supremacy of reason and in the perfectibility of human nature. When in July 1791 the mob, incited by the anti-Jacobin propaganda of the government, attacked his house and destroyed his laboratory, Priestley emigrated to Pennsylvania.

As late as 1794 Coleridge still looked up to Priestley as to a spiritual and political guide. Among his “Sonnets to eminent characters” he dedicated one to Priestley in December 1794:

Though rous'd by that dark Vizir Riot rude
 Have driven our Priestley o'er the Ocean swell;
 Though Superstition and her wolfish brood
 Bay his mild radiance, impotent and fell;
 Calm in his halls of brightness he shall dwell!
 For lo! Religion at his strong behest
 Starts with mild anger from the Papal spell,
 And flings to Earth her tinsel-glittering vest,
 Her mitred State and cumbrous Pomp unholy;
 And Justice wakes to bid th' Oppressor wail
 Insulting aye the wrongs of patient Folly;
 And from her dark retreat by Wisdom won
 Meek Nature slowly lifts her matron veil
 To smile with fondness on her gazing Son!

² “The Enquiry concerning Political Justice I apprehend to be blemished principally by three errors, 1. Stoicism, or an inattention to the principle, that pleasure and pain are the only bases on which morality can rest. 2. Sandemanianism, or an inattention to the principle, that feeling, and not judgment, is the source of human actions. 3. The unqualified condemnation of the private affections. It will easily be seen how strongly these errors are connected with the Calvinist system” (qtd. in White, 2006, p. 94).

The sonnet suggests that Coleridge considered Priestley's Unitarian theology as the consummation of the Reformation: Christianity is, at long last, fully liberated from Papal influence in the religion inculcated by Priestley. His political writings are described as envisaging an end to oppression of all kinds, and his science appears to be able to disclose the laws of nature. In 1802, however, in *Anima Poetae*, he calls Priestley "worldly" and Dr Price "cold;" at the same time he expresses the urgent need to reconcile the claims of the two extreme positions produced by eighteenth-century thought: "Socinianism, moonlight; methodism, a stove. O for some sun to unite heat and light!" (Coleridge, 1895, pp. 48, 49, 183).

What Coleridge diagnosed in 1804 had been distinctly seen by Price himself already three decades previously, when, in his letter of 17 June 1770 addressed to his sister, he defined his position in the following way: "You know the religion I am for is not a sour or enthusiastical religion, but a religion free from bigotry, superstition, and uncharitableness, and that shows itself in all good works and amiable qualities as well as in the discharge of the duties of devotion" (qtd. in Thomas, 1977, p. 4). The threat of a split between reason and affection intrigued Price, too, and he tried to find a way to bind reason (Coleridge's moonlight) and sensibility (Coleridge's stove) more closely together. Rejecting the Calvinism of his forebears which, with its emphasis on Original Sin and predestination, robbed individual moral aspirations of all significance, his greatest ambition was to reconcile natural philosophy and revealed religion, political liberty and order, freedom of individual thought and duty objective and universally binding. He defined his own theology as "a middle scheme between Calvinism and Socinianism" (Price, 1816, p. 106). This implies the rejection of Calvinism, including its theology of double predestination, the depravity of reason and the necessity of spiritual regeneration (the theology that belief does not come from us but from spiritual renewal bestowed by God (Hickman, 2017, p. 3). At the same time, instead of the Jesus of the Socinians, a Jesus divested of his divinity and reduced to the status of a man who embodied the highest moral virtues, the Jesus of Price was a "Prophet and Messenger" from God; he was more than a man, he was endowed with extraordinary powers and he had existed "before his appearance in this world in a state of dignity and glory." Price maintained that "the only object of our religious worship is that one Supreme Being who sent him into the world; all prayer directed to other beings is an idolatry." Embracing all the diverse ways of approaching God, Price taught unrestricted tolerance. In one of his sermons entitled "On the greater importance of right practice than a sound faith in religion," with sound meaning dogmatically correct, he says: "[T]here is nothing fundamental in religion besides sincerely desiring to know, and faithfully doing the will of God." And again, in another sermon, he goes as far as to say: "There is properly nothing fundamental except an upright heart" (Price, 1816, pp. 110, 106–7, 56, 84).

It is this intellectual milieu that reinforced Wollstonecraft's inborn spirit of independence and integrity of mind. Although her familiarity with Price's works is evidenced by her letter to George Blood (Wollstonecraft, 1979, p. 170), no philological data are available to mark the limits of her debt to the theology and moral philosophy of Richard Price: the immediate references to him can be read as expressions of admiration and love. We owe her a graphic description of Dr Price in the pulpit:

I could almost fancy that I now see this respectable old man, in his pulpit, with hands clasped, and eyes devoutly fixed, praying with all the simple energy of unaffected piety; or, when more erect, inculcating the dignity of virtue, and enforcing the doctrines his life adorns; benevolence animated each feature, and persuasion attuned his accents; the preacher grew eloquent, who only laboured to be clear; and the respect that he extorted, seemed only the respect due to personified virtue and matured wisdom (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 36).

In *A vindication of the rights of men* her personal venom against Edmund Burke is motivated by her admiration for Price the man and the thinker, “whose talents and modest virtues place him high in the scale of moral excellence. [...] a man whose habits are fixed by piety and reason, and whose virtues are consolidated into goodness, that worthy man in his whole life never dreamt of struggling for power or riches” (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 17). There is only one point that Wollstonecraft makes in her various writings which can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of a kinship of vision: it is her reference to the extreme latitude of Price’s theology. In *A vindication of the rights of men* Wollstonecraft remembers Dr Price’s advice to “those, who do not approve of our Liturgy, and cannot find any mode of worship out of the church, in which they can conscientiously join, to establish one for themselves” (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 18). Wollstonecraft herself was one of those who followed his advice. However distorted the portrait of his wife is by typical male prejudices, Godwin is certainly right when he discusses her religion in the paragraph where her friendship with Richard Price is mentioned, and when he characterises her faith as “almost entirely of her own creation. [I]t was little [...] allied to any system of forms. But she was not on that account the less attached to it, or the less scrupulous in discharging what she considered as its duties” (Godwin, 1798, p. 13). Louise Hickman claims that at the time she wrote *Mary, A Fiction* in 1787, Wollstonecraft’s position can be considered to represent the religious position of a „typical Enlightenment intellectual” rejecting blind faith in favour of rational religion and toleration,” which underwent a radical development later and eventually, when she composed *A Short Residence in Sweden* in 1796, her faith can be called pantheism (Hickman, 2017, pp. 156, 174). Pantheism creates an affinity between Wollstonecraft and the canonical early Romantics, that is, Blake, and Wordsworth as well as Coleridge in their younger phase, whose vision of nature has been defined as pantheism by Engell. Blake, the younger Wordsworth and Coleridge all “believed during at least one important stage in their lives in the *en kai pan*, the “one and the all,” whose two elements form the word pantheism. This view recognizes the inviolable unity of God as one separate being yet sees him simultaneously as a presence dwelling in each part of his creation” (Engell, 1981, pp. 251–252). At the same time, it should be emphasised, as it was emphasised by Godwin in his *Memoirs* already, that Wollstonecraft’s faith in God was always deeply personal.

Godwin’s *Memoirs* of his wife highlight one of the most important aspects of religion in the theology of both Price and Wollstonecraft: they both prioritised the ethical in the bond between God and man. Price as well as Wollstonecraft considered goodness as the most important divine attribute. Knowing God’s goodness and trying to reach His moral perfection was the essence of their religious faith. This desire to

attain an ever-greater degree of moral perfection was not motivated by fear: as Wollstonecraft told her husband she “could not remember the time when she believed the doctrine of future punishment and retribution” (Godwin, 1798, p. 13). The ability to know the goodness of God and the effort to imitate it is a proof and a prerequisite of the immortality of the soul. In one of his sermons Price proclaimed: “Though eternal torment cannot take place under the government of a benevolent Deity—final destruction may. [...] May Heaven keep us steadfast in this [attainment of religious virtue] lest [...] we should sink at last, swallowed up and lost in the dark womb of uncreated night” (Price, 1816, p. 49). The terrifying idea of “being swallowed up by uncreated night” was known by Wollstonecraft, who was so prone to depression, but similarly to Price she also thought that striving for moral perfection is a guarantee of immortality: “The stamen of immortality [...] is the perfectibility of human reason; for were man created perfect, or did a flood of knowledge break in upon him, when he arrived at maturity, that precluded error, I should doubt whether his existence would be continued after the dissolution of the body” (Wollstonecraft, 1993, pp. 121–2).

It was not only her moral philosophy that was motivated by her deep religious faith: her indictment of the gender politics of her time was also buttressed by arguments prompted by her religious views. Her starting point in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is theological:

Firmly persuaded that no evil exists in the world that God did not design to take place, I build my belief on the perfection of God.

Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will *be* right (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 79).

“All will be right” since human reason can reach a degree of perfection when it will apprehend the perfection of God. Evil is a providential part of the world; it is the stimulus which moves reason towards the recognition of the moral rectitude of the divine mind and creates the will in man to imitate divine goodness.

This idea of the necessary education of reason can be traced back to Price's thesis which claims that “[t]his world was [...] designed to be a school of virtue,” because “[m]an [...] is not made at once that creature which he is designed to be. His existence is progressive, and he is made to rise by step, and to pass through a succession of stages, each one of which prepares him for the next that follows it” (Price, 1816, pp. 45, 37). In his main dissertation in ethics, *A review of the principal questions in morals* (first published in 1758), which has been defined as “the fullest and most convincing defence in the mid-eighteenth century of the rationalist account of the foundation of morals” (Rivers 2005, p. 172), Price defines the optimistic concept of the Enlightenment, perfectibility, in terms of the expansion of the power of reason by experience:

Our intellectual faculties are in their infancy. The lowest degrees of reason are sufficient to discover *moral distinctions* in general; because these are self-evident and included in the ideas of certain actions and characters, they must, therefore, appear to all who are capable of making actions the objects of their reflexion. But the extent to which they appear, and the accuracy and force with

which they are discerned; consequently, their influence must, so far as they are the objects of pure intelligence, be in proportion to the strength and improvement of the rational faculties of beings and their acquaintance with truth and the natures of things (Price, 1787, p. 95).

In the development of his moral philosophy Price came face to face with two problems that undermined his apparently optimistic trust in reason. One was the threat of losing sight of God who had been posited as the supreme pattern of man's idea of moral rectitude. In the *Review* he defined the ideas of right and wrong as "simple ideas" in the Lockean sense: they do not depend on either sensation or reflection. In his system, they belong to an archetypal realm of truth and as such are universal and immutable. The archetypal status of the moral laws, however, implied some difficulty. "Morality has been presented as necessary and immutable," he says in the *Review*. "There is an objection to this [...] that this is setting up something distinct from God, which is independent of him, and equally eternal and necessary," and this might make the idea of God superfluous, that is, it might lead to atheism. The other difficulty arose from the emphasis on the perfectibility of the human mind, which implied pantheistic conclusions: pantheism would deprive the concepts of responsibility and liberty of all meaning. To avoid these intellectual pitfalls the transcendence of the Supreme Being was to be confirmed, and man was to be granted a faculty capable of going beyond the authority of sensation and reflection. Enlightenment reason was to be empowered to intimate the spiritual beyond the natural. Price found a most stimulating source in seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonism to solve this problem.

Cambridge Platonism

The seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists' position as theologians and natural philosophers—some of them, indeed, like Ralph Cudworth and George More, were members of the Royal Society—was similar to his own predicament. They also recognized that an ever wider gap was about to get wedged between science and faith. They produced their own Platonic or Plotinian Christianity, that is, a position purified of irrational ecclesiastical dogmas as much as of the emotional transport of religious "enthusiasm." It was "a middle scheme" between "the meretricious gaudiness of the Church of Rome, and the squalid sluttishness of Fanatick conventicles," as a contemporary observer said (Patrides, 170, pp. 7, 10). The Cambridge Platonists relied to a great extent on the synthesis of the Platonic and Christian positions created by fifteenth-century Florentine Neoplatonism whose influence on the mind of their time was instrumental in bringing about a slackening of the ties that bound human thinking to the strictly defined dogmatism of the Medieval Church and in giving room to the mind for its independent operation. In his commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus* Ficino gives pride of place to intuitive apprehension which grants immediate intimation of ultimate truth. Allegorising the Platonic chariot of the soul he suggests that the Charioteer, that is reason, is "double. [...] I have sufficiently described one aspect as able to join with the principle; but the other is that which is immediately proximate and unites completely with the intelligible world, and this is the highest act of understand-

ing and instant intuition" (Allen, 1981, p. 100). Intuition is able completely to unite with the suprasensible reality.

Relying on Plato, the Renaissance Neo-Platonists and the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century, Richard Price produced an eighteenth-century type of Neo-Platonism.³ He argued that, contrary to the implications of empiricism, reason⁴ is able to transcend the world of sense-perception as well as the authority of reflection, and in immediate intellectual perception it can apprehend moral truth which belongs to an archetypal reality coeternal with God. This ideal Platonic morality implies "not simply that men may by the exercise of their reason, independently of revelation, determine the content of the moral law [...] but the more radically anti-Calvinist positions that the moral law is binding even upon God's will, and that the law is so binding by virtue of its rectitude" (Thomas, 1977, p. 26). Price's conception of moral truth as objective, immutable and universal is offered as a refutation of "the moral sense doctrine of Francis Hutcheson, the epistemological, moral, and religious skepticism of David Hume, the epistemological argument and moral and legal voluntarism of John Locke, and the physical hypotheses of all manner of mechanists and materialists" (Zebrowski, 1994, p. 17). This power of immediate perception that belongs to reason/understanding does not only grasp immutable principles of truth, it also is the source of new ideas: "The power, I think, that understands; or the faculty within us that discerns truth, and that compares all objects of thought, and judges of them, is a spring of new ideas" (Price, 1787, p. 16). Quoting Plato's *Theaetetus* and Ralph Cudworth's *Treatise concerning eternal and immutable morality* (1631), in the *Review* Price defines his own conception of reason or understanding (which is a form of reason in his terminology) in the following way:

it appears that sense and understanding are faculties of the soul totally different. The one being conversant only about particulars; the other about universals. The one not discerning, but suffering [passive]; the other not suffering [active] but discerning; and signifying the soul's Power of surveying and examining all things in order to judge them; which Power, perhaps, can hardly be better defined than by calling it, in Plato's language, the power in the soul to which belongs κατάληψις τοῦ ὄντος, or the apprehension of TRUTH (Price, 1787, pp. 21–2).

Price's reason includes a faculty that is able intuitively to apprehend the moral idea of good and evil. In a note Price adds: "According to Dr. Cudworth, abstract ideas are implied in the cognoscitive power of the mind; which, he says, contains in itself virtually (as the future plant or tree is contained in the seed) general notions of all things, which are exerted by it, or unfold and discover themselves as occasions invite

³ Patrides calls the system of the Cambridge Platonists rational mysticism (p. 17). It is important to emphasise that Richard Price purified their thought of all mysticism.

⁴ Isabel Rivers distinguishes two slightly different senses in which the Cambridge Platonists used the term reason: it was seen either as a divine implantation or as a faculty of ratiocination (Rivers, 1991, p. 63). I think both Price and Wollstonecraft had the first meaning in mind when they defined the nature of the human mind.

and proper circumstances occur. It is what he thought, Plato meant by making all knowledge to be *Reminiscence*” (Price, 1787, pp. 38–9).

It is not quite clear how much Price meant to suggest that he accepted the idea of the prenatal existence of the human soul or the Platonic concept of innate ideas. What is, however, more interesting concerns the moral dignity that he attributed to the individual mind. Moral laws are objective, they can be known intuitively by man, and they do not depend upon God’s will mediated by the Church or on positive laws established by the State. Indeed, “it is one of the attractions of Price’s philosophy, that after so many systems which had degraded man, he, on the contrary, exalted, to some extent deified man” (Laboucheix, 1970, p. 84).

In the *Review* Price responds to one more anxiety of his contemporaries, to the threat created by the exclusive trust placed in reason. He restores the unity of the mind by binding affect organically to reason and by subordinating passions to the alliance of intellect and emotion. He complements reason/understanding with an affective drive which moves understanding towards immediate intuitive insight. He maintains that reason is insufficient to give man moral guidance, we are so constituted that the apprehension of right moral conduct is accompanied by joy:

in men it is necessary that the *rational principle*, or the *intellectual discernment of right or wrong* should be aided by *instinctive determinations*.—The dictates of mere reason, being slow, and deliberate, would be otherwise much too weak. The condition in which we are placed, renders many urgent passions necessary for us; and these cannot but often interfere with our sentiments of rectitude. Reason alone (important as it is in us) is by no means sufficient to defend us against the danger to which, in such circumstances, we are exposed. Our Maker, therefore, wisely provided remedies for its imperfections; and established a due balance in our frame by annexing to our intellectual perceptions sensations and instincts, which give them greater weight and force.

In short. The truth seems to be that, in contemplating the acts of moral agents, we have both a perception of the understanding and a feeling of our heart (Price, 1787, pp. 95–6).

There is one more element in the Neo-Platonic tradition that had come down to Price in the interpretation of the Cambridge Platonists and that apparently had an influence on Wollstonecraft’s thought. Knowing God—apprehending good—is not enough, Plotinus seems to claim. In his judgment, genuine virtue seeks to relate to the world through the exercise of operative charity. C. A. Patrides has pointed out that one of the *loci classici* especially dear for the Cambridge Platonists was Plotinus’s *Ennead* II, 9, 15:

to say ‘Look to God’ is not helpful without some instruction as to what this looking imports: it might very well be said that one can ‘look’ and still sacrifice no pleasure, still be the slave of impulse, repeating the word ‘God’ but held in the grip of every passion and making no effort to master any. [...] ‘God’ on the lips without a good conduct of life, is a word” (Plotinus, 1991, p. 127).

In agreement with this statement of Plotinus, and at the same time, intending to counteract Plotinus's insistence on the necessary withdrawal from the world of sense to reach a mystical awareness of God, the Cambridge Platonist inculcated active benevolence and charity. Whichcote said, "*cogito ergo sum* should be revised to read 'I act, therefore I am.'" The final goal in religion is an active practice of universal charity (Patrides, 1970, p. 15).

Shift in Wollstonecraft's concept of reason

Wollstonecraft and her mentor shared the starting point on which their philosophy was raised: both were deeply rooted in the Enlightenment with its optimistic belief in the unlimited perfectibility of human reason. In her unfinished essay on the French Revolution, *An historical and moral view of the French Revolution*, it is not so much the collapse of the old regime and the victory of the progressive ideology of the middle classes, but the triumph of reason that she celebrates, when she says: "Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face [...] and it will be impossible for the dark hand of despotism again to obscure it's [sic] radiance" (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 295). In his sermon "on the love of our country" Price also welcomed the victory of reason over superstition.

Wollstonecraft shared Price's utopistic concept of human nature and was convinced that reason if properly developed will desire to reach godlike rectitude. In the spirit of the humanitarianism of the Dissenting tradition, her moral philosophy is based on her belief in the ability of the individual to attain virtue without the control of ecclesiastical and political legislation. In her account of the French Revolution, appalled by the excess of the uncontrolled energy released by the Reign of Terror, she connects her unabating optimism as to the outcome of the events with her hope for the triumph of reason and virtue (Hutton, 2021, p. 185). She feels confident that in her pamphlet was she will be able to prove "that knowledge is rapidly advancing to that degree of perfectibility, when the proud distinctions of sophisticating fools will be eclipsed by the mild rays of philosophy, and man be considered as man—acting with the dignity of an intelligent being." As a result of the triumph of reason a "more enlightened moral love" will bind the members of the community to each other (Wollstonecraft 1993, pp. 294, 319). This process will necessarily bring about the demesne of all superstition including the concept of the Original Sin:

We must get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin, the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora's box, and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate, on which priests have erected their tremendous structures of imposition, to persuade us, that we are naturally inclined to evil. We shall then leave room for the expansion of the human heart and, I trust, that men will insensibly render each other happier as they grow wiser (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 294).

Liberated from the fear of future punishment and retribution, the individual mind, if properly educated, will be able to realize its full potential. Indeed, during her short

career, Wollstonecraft returned again and again to the question of education. Education in Wollstonecraft's vocabulary has a Lockean connotation: the mind is to be exposed to experience to reach maturity. In *A vindication of the rights of woman*, Wollstonecraft suggests that men's apparent intellectual superiority is to be attributed to their experience of life being more extensive than that of women: "they give a freer scope to the grand passions, and by more frequently going astray enlarge their minds" (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 185). And she argues that being limited by the educational policy of their parents, young women will never be able to attain moral, emotional, and intellectual maturity as they never confront actual reality:

The world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator; we must mix in the throng and feel as men feel, before we can judge of their feelings. If we mean, in short, to live in the world, to grow wiser and better, and not merely to enjoy the good things of life, we must attain a knowledge of others at the same time that we become acquainted with ourselves. Knowledge acquired in any other way only hardens the heart and perplexes the understanding.

I may be told that the knowledge thus acquired is sometimes purchased at too dear a rate. I can only answer that I very much doubt whether any knowledge can be attained without labour and sorrow; and those who wish to spare their children both should not complain if they are neither wise nor virtuous (Wollstonecraft, 1993, pp. 187–88).

Indeed, the world is "a school of virtue" as Price put it. Experience, the attainment of knowledge of others and ourselves was so important in Wollstonecraft's judgment that she uses the motif again in *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. In her letter to her lost child, Maria gives an account of her own tragic story and admonishes her daughter not to make the mistakes her mother has made. "Gain experience—ah! gain it—while experience is worth having, and acquire sufficient fortitude to pursue your own happiness; it includes your utility, by a direct path" (Wollstonecraft, 1980, p. 153). A provocatively daring idea in a civilisation in which the norms women were supposed to adopt were modesty, delicacy, and self-effacing submission to the authority of fathers, husbands, and brothers.

Furthermore, it can also be assumed that she was encouraged by Price's revision of empiricist epistemology and his Platonic concept of immediate perception when in various writings of hers she repeatedly discussed reason and eventually extended its meaning and ascribed to it an ability to transcend the boundaries of sensation and reflection. This additional power of reason has a part to play in both normal cognition and the creative work of a poet and it is able to elevate the mind to the apprehension of truth. However, while Price sticks to the empirical concept of perception, in the *Review* he claims, as we have seen above, that sense is passive, i.e. in perception the mind is a passive recipient of impressions, Wollstonecraft moves beyond empiricism when she asserts the great argument of Wordsworth and Coleridge: thanks to this aspect of human thinking the mind in simple perception itself is productive: it is "half-creating" the sight it perceives.⁵

⁵ See William Wordsworth: "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," l. 106.

Wollstonecraft's libidized imagination—a correction of Price's imaginative reason

For the first time it is in her letter to Henry Dyson Gabell dated 16 April 1787, where in a tentative way Wollstonecraft connects reason, the love of God and the desire for virtue, that is, the intellectual, the moral and the affective powers of the mind in an organic bond to describe the “flight” of reason that leads to ultimate knowledge. She also describes the painful situation, which she calls madness, when the mind gets disintegrated as a result of reason functioning on its own.

At times indeed my reason has been too far stretched and tottered almost on the brink of madness. [...] Why have we implanted in us an irresistible desire to think—if thinking is not necessary to make us wise unto salvation. Indeed, intellectual and moral improvement seem to me so connected—I cannot, even in thought separate them. Employing the understanding purifies the heart, gives dignity to the affections, by allowing the mind to analyse them—and they who can assign a reason for loving their fellow-creatures—will endeavour to serve the Great Spirit rationally—and they will see the beauty of Holiness, and be drawn by the cord of love. How can the mind govern the body if it is not exercised [...] if we were more perfect the single desire of pleasing the Author of all good might be sufficient to make us virtuous—but we are so framed that we want continual variety—and the appetites will rule if the mind is vacant. It is true our reasonings are often fallacious—and our knowledge mostly conjectural—yet these flights into an obscure region open the faculties of the soul (Wollstonecraft, 1979, p. 149).

What she maintains here is not only that there has to be a connection between the culture of the mind and the culture of the heart, and that the loss of the balance in the mind leads either to madness or to the domination of the appetites. She also highlights self-analysis, inwardness as a way to understanding. At this point, following the lead of Rousseau, she embraces an ancient tradition that goes back to Plotinus, surfaces in Renaissance Neo-Platonism and eventually it becomes the basic moral idea of English Neo-Platonism (Cassirer, 1950, p. 28). Wollstonecraft in this context leaves behind Richard Price who was not interested in Plotinus and introspection.

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue [...], cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring to light all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty [...] until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue (Plotinus, 1991, p. 54).

This central thought of Plotinus, his insistence that the individual soul is a mirror of the divine, and the shift that can be detected in his interpretation of Plato from the good to the beautiful as the most important aspect of the divine, had a decisive influence on Ficino who, in his commentary on the *Phaedrus*, claims that by attaining “fullness,” i.e. perfection the individual soul can become godlike:

any rational soul's power is so great that any one soul in a way may be the universe. Whenever it withdraws into its own fullness, it will unfold all the varieties of motions and powers in itself; and it will pursue the universal providence as if it were the colleague [collega] of any celestial soul and even of the world-soul (Allen, 1981, p. 92).

Ficino recognized the desire for the beautiful to be the motive power of the soul toward the good. Cassirer asserts that "Ficino's work on the Platonic theology did not influence his contemporaries or their successors so powerfully and directly as did his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*"—that is, on Plato's conception of Eros. It was under the effect of this influence that "first almost unnoticed the Augustinian dogma commences little by little to relax" (Cassirer 1950, p.10). Ficino complemented the Platonic concept of *Eros* to the Christian idea of charity or *agape* and elevated this compound on the height of his religion. This vision of the erotic dynamism of the universe sustained by the libidized attraction between the divine and the human was widespread during the Renaissance and was later adopted by Cambridge Platonism to explain the bond that can never be severed which connects man to God and God to man.

Price's insistence on the necessary connection between reason and affection in moral judgment does not have the erotic connotation of the Neo-Platonic idea of love, a connotation that becomes, however, increasingly important for Wollstonecraft. Already in the *Vindication of the rights of woman* Wollstonecraft quoted Plato and Milton to support the moral justification of her own concept of love: "human love led to heavenly, [which] was only an exaltation of the same affection" (Wollstonecraft, 1993, p. 46). Two years later, during her *liaison* with Gilbert Imlay, she recognizes that the trinity of reason, love, and virtue is to be complemented by imagination which idealizes the object of love and gives permanence to desire. Love as a physical appetite is purified and elevated by the imagination to the level of love which seeks the beauty and rectitude of the divinity. She claims that this sublimation of instincts is the distinction of genius.

In her letter of 22 September 1794 Wollstonecraft articulates a radical shift in her epistemology in a context that is created by her distressful relationship with her lover:

Believe me, sage sir, you have not sufficient respect for the imagination—I could prove to you in a trice that it is the mother of sentiment, the great distinction of our nature, the only purifier of the passions—animals have a portion of reason, and equal, if not more exquisite, senses; but no trace of imagination, or her offspring taste, appears in any of their actions. The impulse of the senses, passions, if you will, and the conclusions of reason, draw men together; but the imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven, to animate this cold creature of clay, producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering men social by expanding their hearts, instead of leaving them leisure to calculate how many comforts society affords (Wollstonecraft, 1979, p. 262).

Reason, passion, and sensation—the Platonic/Priceian triad—are not only complemented by imagination, but imagination is now seen as the divine faculty of man.

Imagination which moves the whole personality of man as a faculty of coordination and elevation has replaced reason and is securely at the helm of the vessel now. Nine months later, in her letter of 12 June 1795, Wollstonecraft analyses the operation of the imagination and defines its function in a moral as well as an artistic context.

The common run of men, I know, with strong health and gross appetites, must have variety to banish ennui, because the imagination never lends its magic wand, to convert appetite into love, cemented by according reason.—Ah! my friend, you know not the ineffable delight, the exquisite pleasure, which arises from a unison of affection and desire, when the whole soul and senses are abandoned to a lively imagination, that renders every emotion delicate and rapturous. Yes; these are emotions, over which satiety has no power, and the recollection of which even disappointment cannot disenchant; but they do not exist without self-denial. These emotions, more or less strong, appear to me to be the distinctive characteristic of genius, the foundation of taste, and of that exquisite relish for the beauties of nature, of which the common herd of eaters and drinkers and child-beggetters, certainly have no idea. You will smile at an observation that has just occurred to me:—I consider those minds as the most strong and original, whose imagination acts as the stimulus to their senses (Wollstonecraft, 1979, p. 291).

The supremacy of reason is not explicitly challenged here, it is, however, defined as a faculty which, since it has no direct control over the passions, will use the imagination as a medium which, by creating desires towards an object chosen by reason, is able to regulate appetite (Reuter, 2017, p. 22). Barbara Taylor was the first to call Wollstonecraft's imagination "eros-inspired" (Taylor, 2003, pp. 108 ff). Wollstonecraft's concept of the trinity of reason, love and virtue cemented by the imagination is indeed a modern, eighteenth-century progeny to Plato's philosophy and Neo-Platonic theology. Taylor does not fail, however, to do justice to Wollstonecraft's daring originality in appropriating the concept of desire for use in her own egalitarian philosophy: "Throughout its very long history, this ideal had been almost entirely androcentric," while the female body "has been a site of earthly corruption" (Taylor, 2003, p. 113). In the Christian tradition a woman is seen as an attractive object of masculine desire: "For contemplation he and valour formed, / For softness she and sweet attractive grace" (*Paradise Lost*, IV. 298–9). Traced back to the ancient pagan tradition desire leading to heavenly love appears to be an exclusively male prerogative: in the *Symposium* Pausanias asserts that it is the sexual appetite inspired by the son of Aphrodite Pandemos that seeks woman for its satisfaction. In Wollstonecraft's philosophy reason is libidinated, and a woman attains not only the right to reason but also the right erotically to desire earthly and heavenly love alike.

Shift in Wollstonecraft's mode of writing—comparison with Wordsworth's early poetry

Wollstonecraft's letters have not received any serious scholarly attention until now. They can be predicted to assume the kind of status in the future that is enjoyed by the letters of Keats. They also do away the boundary between public and private discourses and create an autobiographical context for the expression of sudden insights into complex questions of moral philosophy and aesthetic theory as well as practice. She wrote the letter quoted above a few weeks after her first suicide attempt. She comprehended the character and operation of the imagination under great emotional strain and through the psychological exploration of self. The definition of the use of the imagination is a result not only of the self-analysis of a woman unhappily and passionately attached to an unworthy lover but also of a writer whose insight recorded in the letter promises a radical shift in the mode of writing she has employed up to now. The shift can be detected in her travelogue, *Letters written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), in which she moves from the sentimentalism of her first novel to a new mode of writing, and, in some descriptive passages, she connects empirical reality and the intuition of Eternity in the transport of the imagination. My contention is that in some emotionally highly charged passages of these letters she constructed the feminine version of early Romanticism in England: these passages can be read side by side with moments of insight in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805) as the most powerful examples of the imagination leading through an investment in the quotidian to an intuition of immortality, that is, she preceded Wordsworth in finding the language to convey the pantheism that she shared with the early British Romantics, that is, her theology of nature with an obstinate commitment to the sensations felt while contemplating the landscape:

I have often mentioned the grandeur, but I feel myself unequal to the task of conveying an idea of the beauty and elegance of the scene when the spiry tops of the pines are loaded with ripening seed, and the sun gives a glow to their light-green tinge, which is changing into purple, one tree more or less advanced contrasted with another. The profusion with which Nature has decked them with pendant honours, prevents all surprise at seeing in every crevice some sapling struggling for existence. Vast masses of stone are thus encircled, and roots torn up by the storms become a shelter for a young generation. The pine and fir woods, left entirely to Nature, display an endless variety; and the paths in the woods are not entangled with fallen leaves, which are only interesting whilst they are fluttering between life and death. The grey cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines is a much finer image of decay; the fibres whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to be stealing away. I cannot tell why, but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free to expand in I know not what element—nay, I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought, before it can be happy.

Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cav-

ities which mocked the exploring eye produced an equal activity in my mind. My thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery. Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose with renewed dignity above its cares. Grasping at immortality—it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me; I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come (Wollstonecraft, 2009, pp. 88–89).

The overwhelmingly rich impression of the physical world—rent by huge energies and in a mysterious way mirroring the emotional tension of the speaker—built up of powerful visual, auditory, kinetic effects, in which there is an emphasis on time, on things being in a state of transition between birth and maturity (“ripening seed”), life and death (struggle for existence and decay), youth (“sapling”) and old age (“aged pines”), imprisonment and unfettered liberty, is eventually replaced with the impersonal and timeless: the concrete and personal vanishes (“bounding over the black speck of life to come”) and eternity appears. Eternity, however, appears deceptively as something that is there for the outstretched hand to touch. This is a tour-de-force of the typically feminine vision of nature, “discriminating minute objects” and “assembling a world out of its disjointed particulars” (Curran, 1988, p. 189), which can be read as an encoded investigation of the psychology of a woman isolated, alienated and imprisoned in her self-pity, longing for and eventually finding release. What has been defined as a typical subversion of the masculine mode of writing (Curran, 2010, p. 198), the gendered opposition between the masculine sublime and the feminine beautiful is challenged here not only by small things and great, earth and heaven put side by side, but, explicitly, by questioning their traditional juxtaposition: “the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited were pleasurable.”

Wordsworth uses sensation and imagination in the same way to lead reason towards the intuition of the Supreme Mind which maintains meaning in the disjointed things of nature. In *The Prelude* in some episodes of the greatest intensity when, after a detailed personal narrative built upon the impressions of the senses, the narrator reaches a moment of ecstasy, a breakthrough is achieved from the particular and sensuous detail to the universal and spiritual, from the many to the One, brought about by the imagination. The description of the Simplon Pass episode, following a passage which celebrates the imagination (*The Prelude*, 1805. VI. 525–549), was composed in 1805, nine years after the first publication of Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, and later it found its way almost unaltered into the final version of the poem.

[...] The brook and road
 Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy Pass,
 And with them did we journey several hours
 At a slow step. The immeasurable height
 Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
 The stationary blasts of water-falls,
 And every where along in the narrow rent,
 Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,

The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
 And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
 The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of Eternity,
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (*The Prelude*, 1805. VI. 553–572)

Wordsworth shows the universal contained in the phenomena of Nature, the One revealed in the many. He proceeds gradually from the sensuous towards the abstract and, finally, in a Platonic moment of revelation, all the details cohere in a unified pattern in which the things that make up the diversity of the landscape assume the status of types and symbols, and the mind recognizes the presence of Eternity in the mutable face of Nature.

Wollstonecraft's strategy is significantly different. She keeps close to sensation without ever entering the airy world of abstractions from which the senses would be excluded. She does not reflect upon what she describes, and she avoids a shift from the personal and concrete to the universal and abstract until the end of the passage. Even in the moment of insight, it is not the mind but the body—"grasping at Immortality"—that supplies the data to the imagination to build on. Despite the similarity of the quasi-religious experience—panentheism—conveyed, these are two different ways to vision that they are granted while contemplating a natural scene. Wollstonecraft recreates it—by carefully balancing opposite sensuous details in a precarious balance, whereas Wordsworth shifts his focus from the concrete to the abstract.

The later eighteenth century can be best seen as "the process of the Enlightenment's transforming itself. The last thirty or forty years of the century constitute that time when the Enlightenment was creating Romanticism, primarily by developing the idea of the imagination" (Engell, 1981, p. IX). Wollstonecraft's own career demonstrates this transformation: her view of the imagination was formed and informed by a complex religious sensibility which led her to a substantive engagement with the philosophical crosscurrents that emerged in the work of the Radical dissenters. She, however, went beyond their position, and in the last phase of her development in her letters she appears to be a serious theorist of the Romantic idea of the imagination; she should play a significant role in how we understand imagination and its intellectual origins in the eighteenth century.⁶

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⁶ It is interesting to know that Wollstonecraft as a serious thinker whose contribution to the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century cannot be ignored is fully integrated into the historical panorama of the intellectual crosscurrents that produced Romantic Stoicism by Jacob Risinger in his book *Stoic Romanticism and the Ethics of Emotion* (2021).

Declarations

Conflict of interest I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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