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PART I

Life and Works

CHAPTER I

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On the night of December 26, 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft, alone in her apartment on the rue Meslée in Paris, sat writing a letter to her publisher Joseph Johnson in London. “Once or twice, lifting my eyes from the paper, I have seen eyes glare through a glass-door opposite my chair, and bloody hands shook at me . . . I want to see something alive; death in so many frightful shapes has taken hold of my fancy.—I am going to bed—and, for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle.”¹ She had crossed the Channel to witness the events in France, inspired by the revolutionaries’ attempt to create a more equal society along republican lines. But the silent streets as Louis XVI passed by on his way to trial, so dignified in the face of what she knew to be certain death, shocked her. Wollstonecraft was fierce in argument, quick to pass judgment, sensitive to injustice, but always keenly aware of the springs of human action.

Her life was forged in difficult circumstances. The second of seven children, Mary was born on April 27, 1759 in Spitalfields, in the heart of London’s silk-weaving business, by which her family made their money. But the settled life of the wealthy and well-educated was not her destiny. Her father Edward soon tired of making handkerchiefs, and by the time Mary was four he had moved his family out of the city to Epping in Essex, where he adopted the lifestyle of a gentleman farmer. Before long the family had moved again, first to Barking, also in Essex, and then to Beverley in Yorkshire, where they settled for six years while Edward ran through what remained of his inheritance (said to have been £10,000, which, if true, would be worth today approximately £600,000).² Mary’s early years seesawed from moneyed ease to indebted insecurity.

Her mother Elizabeth, vulnerable, unbookish, weak in character, was the kind of woman Mary would later castigate in her writings. She favored her first child, the son and heir, and failed to protect any of her children from the violent excesses of their lazy, alcoholic father. Mary often slept across her parents’ bedroom door to ensure Elizabeth was not assaulted by

her drunken husband. Denied the education that for her brothers was guaranteed, Mary looked elsewhere for intellectual satisfaction. In Beverley, her school friend Jane Arden's family had a fine library (Jane's father gave lectures on experimental science), of which Mary made far better use than Jane. Later, when the family was suddenly uprooted to Hoxton, she was befriended by their new neighbors the Clares, a reclusive clergyman and his wife, who gave her time and space to read widely. Through the Clares, Mary also met Fanny Blood, in a similar family situation, striving to support her mother and siblings to make up for their father's fecklessness. Mary was impressed by Fanny's "masculine understanding, and sound judgment," allied with "every feminine virtue."³ Mary knew herself to be clever, but she always doubted her ability to win and keep affection, those feminine qualities she both admired and distrusted. As the portraits of her by John Opie reveal, she took very little care of her appearance; her hair was unkempt, her dress simply made. Her gaze, though, is compelling: thoughtful, intense, far-seeing.

In the spring of 1778, aged nineteen, Mary took the only recourse open to her as the poorly educated daughter of a by then penniless father, leaving home to become the live-in companion of a rich widow. Surprisingly, given the dependent nature of her role, Mary remained with Mrs. Dawson for almost four years, enjoying their visits to Bath, Bristol, Southampton, and Windsor, where she was brought within the orbit of clever, witty, educated women. Only when her mother fell gravely ill, in late 1781, did she leave, summoned home by her two younger sisters, Everina and Eliza.

In spite of her unsatisfactory childhood, or perhaps because of it, Mary was always intensely loyal to her family, continuing to support them, often with money, long after they had all grown up. She needed always to feel that she was useful and necessary to them, as if to justify her desire to outgrow them intellectually. When Eliza, who had married in October 1782, became ill after giving birth (probably with postnatal depression), Mary moved in to care for the baby girl. Soon, though, she became convinced that the problem was Eliza's husband Meredith Bishop. "She seems to think she has been very ill used," Mary told Everina. Whatever the truth, Mary decided that Eliza must be rescued. While Bishop was away from home, she hired a hackney coach to take her and Eliza from Bermondsey, south of the river, across London Bridge to new lodgings in Hackney, leaving behind the baby. Eliza was so distressed, torn by indecision and desperate about her child ("the poor brat," as Mary thought of her), that "she bit her wedding ring to pieces."

Mary feared Eliza's future would be no different from their mother's. She took what she knew to be a "desperate" measure, in spite of its implications for Eliza, her baby, and for Mary and Everina too.⁴ Eliza never saw her daughter again (the baby died just before her first birthday), and the sisters were now, all three, tainted by their unconventional behavior. Charles Kegan Paul, who in 1879 attempted to resurrect Wollstonecraft's reputation after a century of neglect, explained this episode as "the first occasion on which any of the great social questions presented themselves to Mary Wollstonecraft: but her rapid mind had no hesitation how this one should be answered."⁵

A couple of years later, Mary stepped into another family crisis, this time to rescue her friend Fanny Blood who was by 1785 living in Lisbon with her husband, an English merchant, and expecting their first child. Mary abandoned her sisters, and the school they had set up in Newington Green, braving the storms of the Bay of Biscay in late November ("the Captain was afraid we should be dismasted") because she feared that Fanny, always delicate, might not survive childbirth. She arrived too late, and Fanny died, as she had feared, along with the baby. Mary could only return disconsolate to London, but the experience showed her how fearless she could be (especially when compared with her fellow travelers) and how much a change of scene could invigorate her spirits.

In her absence, pupil numbers at the school in Newington Green had dwindled, since none of the sisters had turned out to be naturally gifted as teachers, and lack of money forced them to give up the house and find different employment. In October 1786 Mary set off once again, this time to Ireland to become governess to the daughters of Lady Kingsborough, writing to Everina: "I must labor for content and try to reconcile myself to a state which is contrary to every feeling of my soul . . . I entered the great gates [of the Kingsborough estate at Mitchelstown] with the same kind of feeling as I should if I was going into the Bastille."⁶ Within a year she had freed herself, returning to London after being dismissed for becoming more important to the children in her charge than their mother (two of whom were much later to follow Wollstonecraft's careless respect for convention by abandoning their abusive husbands).

Mary had by then published her first book, in late January 1787. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, written at great speed, was inspired by her own lack of an education and her failed attempt to teach others. It was published by Joseph Johnson, whom she had met while living at Newington Green. Perhaps Mary's chief attribute was her gift for

friendship; that “unconquerable greatness of soul” which drew people to her.⁷ Earlier, in April 1784, she had been taken to meet Dr. Johnson, the essayist and creator of the *Dictionary*, by the Reverend John Hewlett, another of her new friends from Newington Green. Johnson was approaching death, his body physically decaying, but he treated Wollstonecraft “with particular kindness and affection” and they had “a long conversation.”⁸ What they talked about, given their apparently opposing views on politics, the law, and the rights of men and women, is not known. Yet Wollstonecraft never forgot their meeting, which may well have encouraged her to become a professional writer.

“Your sex generally laugh at female determinations; but let me tell you, I never yet resolved to do, any thing of consequence, that I did not adhere resolutely to it, till I had accomplished my purpose, improbable as it might have appeared to a more timid mind,” she told her publisher in late 1787. Joseph Johnson had stepped in to help her on her return from the Kingsboroughs, providing her with enough money to rent a home of her own in Blackfriars, south of the river, in return for what she could deliver in writing. “Mr Johnson . . . assures me that if I exert my talents in writing I may support myself in a comfortable way,” she assured Everina. “I am then going to be the first of a new genus.”⁹

As if inspired, the work poured out of her: a novel *Mary; A Fiction* (1788), a collection of short stories “calculated to regulate the affections, and form the mind to truth and goodness,”¹⁰ and countless book reviews, essays, and translations for Johnson’s new periodical, the *Analytical Review*. She also, more controversially, in December 1790 published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, as a counterblast to Edmund Burke’s conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. At first the *Vindication* appeared anonymously but, three weeks later, the second edition announced its author as “Mary Wollstonecraft.”

A year later, her companion volume, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, began to appear piecemeal from Johnson’s presses. Not all were impressed, the writer and political philosopher William Godwin complaining that it was “a very unequal performance . . . deficient in method and arrangement,” and the playwright Hannah Cowley that it was “unfeminine.”¹¹ Wollstonecraft wrote it in just six weeks, pressed by her publisher to get on with it. On reflection she wished she had taken longer, but through the *Vindication* she became famous, attracting some prestigious visitors to her new home in Store Street, Bloomsbury. Talleyrand, bishop of Autun and leader of the aristocratic faction which had ignited the demand for reform in France, wanted to meet the writer who so boldly

dedicated her book to him. (Wollstonecraft hoped the compliment would encourage Talleyrand to take an interest in female education; it didn't.)

Her newfound self-belief is evident in a letter to Mary Hays, in which she critiques the manuscript of *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* that Hays sent to her for approval: "I do not approve of your preface—and I will tell you why . . . This kind of vain humility has ever disgusted me."¹² Meanwhile she began to experiment with some of the ideas about marriage and relationships she had developed in the *Vindication*, proposing that she should live *à trois* with the artist Henry Fuseli (for whom she had conceived a passionate attachment) and his wife. Mrs. Fuseli proved less than compliant, barring Wollstonecraft from their home.

To escape a situation that had become embarrassing, Wollstonecraft left for Paris, traveling as a "political pilgrim," anxious to see for herself this new French society and promising to provide Johnson with eyewitness reportage.¹³ She was soon embedded in the expatriate community, her company sought after because of the *Vindication*. This gave her the bloom of confidence and before long she attracted the attention of Gilbert Imlay, an American army captain who had traveled to Paris ostensibly, like Mary, out of curiosity but secretly hoping to make financial capital out of the revolutionary chaos. Imlay was handsome, a published writer, amusing and flirtatious, and Wollstonecraft fell deeply in love.

They moved in together, leaving Paris, which had become too dangerous (Mary once stepped in a puddle of blood from the latest victims of the guillotine before realizing what it was), and settling in the rural hamlet of Neuilly, just beyond the city walls. Wollstonecraft believed that at last she had found "her true friend," and by late August 1793 she was pregnant. Imlay, though, was an adventurer, and he soon began leaving her alone for weeks at a time while he traveled to Le Havre to pursue his commercial interests. Wollstonecraft felt abandoned and soon despaired. "I do not want to be loved like a goddess," she told Imlay on January 2, 1794, "but I wish to be necessary to you." Professional success had not cured her emotional fragility and, in spite of her conflicted views on marriage as an institution, she began signing herself as "Mary Imlay." This was in part self-protection: the British had been declared as enemy aliens and Wollstonecraft could have been imprisoned. Imlay, for his part, obtained a certificate from the American ambassador stating that Mary was his wife and *de facto* American. But there is no official record of a marriage.

Pregnant and alone, Mary returned to the French capital and carried on working, finishing *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* just in time for the birth of her daughter, named

Fanny after her friend, on May 14, 1794. John Adams, the second American president, was so impressed he read the book twice. “She seems to have half a mind to be an English woman; yet more inclined to be an American,” he remarked.¹⁴ Fanny Imlay’s birth united her parents briefly. Imlay talked of moving his family to America, living in the wilds, and establishing a new kind of republican society, but by the end of September he had absconded again, this time to London. “I wish one moment that I had never heard of the cruelties that have been practiced here [in France], and the next envy the mothers who have been killed with their children,” Mary told him in a letter and shortly after took a dose of laudanum, enough to cause death.¹⁵ Just in time she was discovered, probably by her maid Marguerite, who urged her to think of Fanny, just one year old.

The shock of realizing that she had almost succeeded in abandoning her daughter galvanized Wollstonecraft, and by the end of May 1795 she was in Hull, awaiting a boat that would take her to Scandinavia. Her mission was to find out what had happened to the ship on which Imlay had sent, in secret, a cargo of silver bullion intended for Gothenburg (the silver would pay for much-needed grain to send back to France). It was a most unusual journey for a young woman, her one-year-old child, and a very reluctant Marguerite, but Wollstonecraft appears to have been in her element. She never found the ship, or the silver, but she created from her uncomfortable adventures at sea and across the rugged northern landscape a new kind of travel writing.

In *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (published in January 1796 and soon translated into German, Dutch, and Portuguese) Wollstonecraft fused a critical examination of her emotional distress with keen observations about the society she was traveling through. The poet Robert Southey remarked, “She has made me in love with a cold climate.”¹⁶ Just a couple of months before publication, Wollstonecraft had tried to kill herself for the second time. This time her suicide attempt was no cry for help but a determined effort to end her life (she had discovered Imlay was living openly with another woman, and she could no longer delude herself that he would come back to her). Waiting until late on a cold, wet night in mid-October, she walked beside the river from Battersea Bridge (which she decided was too public) to Putney Bridge, making sure her skirts were thoroughly sodden by the rain and heavy enough to weigh her down. Only when she thought no one was nearby did she jump into the River Thames. Some fishermen, though, had watched her pacing to and fro, and they jumped in after her, bringing her safely back to the riverbank gasping for breath and only semi-conscious.

The horror of trying, and failing, to drown herself purged any remaining suicidal urges and Mary was at last able to tell Imlay, “I now solemnly assure you, that this is an eternal farewell.”¹⁷ Thereafter she resolved to look forward. By the following spring, aged thirty-six, she had made a new friend in William Godwin, whom she had met at the house of the novelist, poet, and campaigner Mary Hays (about whose work Wollstonecraft had once been so terse). He was forty and had just written a bestseller, the gothic thriller *Caleb Williams*, in which a poor, self-educated young man is destroyed by a tyrannical neighbor. Godwin, not an overtly emotional man, took some while to adjust to Mary’s acutely sensitive response to their developing friendship, but very soon he was writing her love letters.

A year later, on March 29, 1797, they were married in St. Pancras Church, Mary signing herself as “Mary Wollstonecraft, spinster.” She was now pregnant with her second child and, anxious “to live as rationally as I can,” she began signing her letters “Mary Wollstonecraft, femme GODWIN.”¹⁸ While she waited for her child to be born, she began writing another novel, never finished, but later published by Godwin in its incomplete state as *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*.

Mary’s labor began in the early hours of Wednesday, August 30. Godwin wanted to employ a trained male physician, but Mary insisted all she needed was the services of an experienced midwife, Mrs. Blenkinsop. It was a long and difficult labor, and her child, named Mary Godwin, was not safely delivered until 11:20 that night. Already weakened by severe loss of blood, Mary then had to endure the futile attempts of Mrs. Blenkinsop to remove the placenta, which had not come away naturally. At three in the morning Godwin rushed off to find an obstetrician, but it was too late. The placenta had been damaged and some of it left behind to breed infection in Mary’s womb. At first she rallied, but by Saturday afternoon she was suffering from a fever. On Sunday she began shaking uncontrollably as her body succumbed to septicemia.

Godwin later clinically recorded the progress of Mary’s decline in his *Memoirs*. Puppies were brought to Mary’s breast to suckle her milk, because it was thought too contaminated to give to the baby. Ten days of acute suffering followed, relieved only by small doses of wine, but at twenty to eight on the morning of Sunday September 10, Wollstonecraft died, aged thirty-eight, leaving two motherless daughters.

In her *Letters from Sweden* Wollstonecraft wrote about Fanny, “I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit—Hapless woman! what a fate is thine!”¹⁹ She was not to know that Fanny would kill herself, aged twenty-two. Mary Godwin, born in

such terrible circumstances, would live on to create *Frankenstein*, still unsurpassed as the logical endgame of the Romantic imagination.

Notes

- 1 *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 216–17.
- 2 William Godwin gives this figure in *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited by Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 1987), 205.
- 3 From a letter to Jane Arden, *Collected Letters*, 25.
- 4 From letters to her sister Everina, *Collected Letters*, 40–50.
- 5 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters to Imlay, with Prefatory Memoir by C. Kegan Paul* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879), xi.
- 6 The letter is dated October 30, 1786, almost three years before the destruction of the Bastille in July 1789. *Collected Letters*, 84.
- 7 William Godwin in his *Memoirs*, 216–17.
- 8 Godwin writes about this in the *Memoirs* (216), although the meeting occurred many years before he knew Wollstonecraft.
- 9 *Collected Letters*, 134, 139.
- 10 The subtitle of *Original Stories*, published in April 1788.
- 11 Quoted by Janet Todd in *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 184.
- 12 *Collected Letters*, 209–11.
- 13 The phrase is suggested by Claire Tomalin in *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Penguin, revised edn., 1992), 157.
- 14 Quoted by Lyndall Gordon in *Mary Wollstonecraft: A New Genus* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), 210.
- 15 *Letters to Imlay*, 103.
- 16 Quoted by Sylvia Norman in her introduction to *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1970), xii.
- 17 *Collected Letters*, 339.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 408–09.
- 19 *Letters Written during a Short Residence*, 66.