

Hidden Polemic in Wollstonecraft's "Letters from Norway": A Bakhtinian Reading

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# Hidden Polemic in Wollstonecraft's *Letters From Norway*: A Bakhtinian Reading

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *LETTERS WRITTEN DURING A SHORT RESIDENCE In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is probably one of the most interesting and complex literary works of its time in terms of genre/style. It combines a great variety of generic forms and discursive styles in a polyphonic simultaneity. It is a travel narrative and an instance of journalistic writing framed in the epistolary mode,<sup>1</sup> which is the dominant form of the literature of Sensibility. As letters addressed to the author's actual lover, it merges autobiography and sentimental discourse inextricably, erasing the boundaries between literary and non-literary discourses. *Letters* is also a Romantic work insofar as it embodies a discourse of Romantic imagination and the sublime uttered by a sentimental author/heroine who strives to redefine herself in terms of an empowered, transcendent subjectivity. This tentative construction of what contemporary criticism defines as the masculine Romantic subject position<sup>2</sup> is intricately and intriguingly fused with the feminine relationality, affectivity and vulnerability inscribed in the author's sentimental discourse at once reproducing and subverting the literary discourse of Sensibility. The fusion of sentimental and Romantic discourses is in turn fused with a discourse of reason embodying Enlightenment humanism and its progressive values.

It is especially with reference to *Letters* that Wollstonecraft has been denoted one of the forerunners of Romanticism.<sup>3</sup> Given her lifelong preoc-

1. Mary Heng, "Tell Them No Lies: Reconstructed Truth in Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 28.3 (Fall 1998): 380, 367.

2. See, for instance, Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 3, and Marlon Ross, "Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis of Poetic Identity," *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 29.

3. Richard Holmes, introduction, "*A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*" and "*Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'*," ed. Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 16, 26–41. See also Mitzi Myers, "Sensibility and the 'Walk of Reason':

cupation and struggle with Sensibility, and given the historical moment of intersection between early, or pre-Romanticism and late Sensibility, it is only natural that the Romanticism inscribed in this work is created through and in fusion with a pervasive discourse of Sensibility. Still, assessing the work from a contemporary point of view, we cannot but find it interesting that as a text embodying Enlightened humanism, rationalism and feminism, and what we have come to perceive as masculine Romanticism, *Letters* is predominantly an expression of Sensibility incorporating some of the main discursive and stylistic elements and characteristics of sentimental literature. Syнды McMillen Conger's remark on Wollstonecraft's whole oeuvre applies also singly and especially to *Letters*:

Viewed as a daughter of the Enlightenment, her extraordinary irrationality seems paradoxical; viewed as a forerunner of Romanticism, her advocacy of reason and her faith in didactic literature seems anachronistic; viewed as a feminist, her romantic attachments and her sentimental reveries mystify.<sup>4</sup>

I will argue that the seemingly conflicting ideological discourses/discursive styles in *Letters* constitute a fusion of discourses/styles, each of which is not only discursively/generically determined, but also modified and dialogized through interfusion. Because sentimental discourse forms the core of the subjective utterances of *Letters*, and also because I will argue that it displays parallels and continuities with the literary discourse of Sensibility, I will particularly dwell on how its discursive characteristics share some of the fundamental properties of the genre of Sensibility. Simultaneously, and in a wider frame of discussion, I will try to demonstrate that this fusion of discourses within the subjective utterances of the author embodies a subtle reaction against the "older" discourses of Enlightenment and Sensibility mainly in the form of a new, Romantic discourse, and that the interpenetration of the sentimental and Romantic discourses embodies the author's discursive efforts to create a Romantic subjectivity and identity for herself along and in conflict with her sentimental subjectivity. I have therefore selected for discussion some of the most prominent passages involving self-expression. Significantly, most of these turn out to include utterances representing and/or more or less explicitly questioning the Enlightenment discourse of reason. I will try to account for the simultaneity

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Mary Wollstonecraft's Literary Reviews as Cultural Critique," *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*, ed. Syнды McMillen Conger (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990) 123, 135, and Mary Heng 384.

4. Syнды McMillen Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994) xi.

and interplay of these three main types of discourse—Sensibility, Enlightenment and Romanticism—by applying to them Bakhtin's concepts of stylization, anti-stylization, hidden, or internal polemic, hybridization and genre.<sup>5</sup>

*Letters* incorporates what can be defined as a stylization of the literary discourse of Sensibility with a strong current of anti-stylization. In both stylization and anti-stylization "the author . . . make[s] use of someone else's discourse for his own purposes, by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and retains, an intention of its own. . . . In one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices."<sup>6</sup> However, "[s]tylization stylizes another's style in the direction of that style's own particular tasks. It merely renders those tasks conventional" (Bakhtin 193). Bakhtin does not define anti-stylization distinctly but indirectly, as the middle term between stylization and parody and as an element of internal polemic. He implicitly defines parody as an extreme instance of anti-stylization: "[in] parody . . . as in stylization, the author again speaks in someone else's discourse, but in contrast to stylization parody introduces into that discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one. . . . In parody, therefore, there cannot be that fusion of voices possible in stylization" (193). We are left to infer that anti-stylization involves a modification, or revision of a particular style which cannot be seen as parody, that is, a discourse in direct opposition to the original discourse.

What *Letters* does with sentimental discourse can be more fully described by "hidden polemic":

In every style, strictly speaking, there is an element of hidden polemic, the difference being merely one of degree and character. Every literary discourse more or less sharply senses its own listener, reader, critic, and reflects in itself their anticipated objections, evaluations, points of view. In addition, literary discourse senses alongside itself another literary discourse, another style. An element of so-called reaction to the preceding literary style, present in every new style, is an example of that same internal polemic; it is, so to speak, a hidden anti-stylization of someone else's style, often combining with a clear parodying of that style. (Bakhtin 196–97)

In *Letters* the fusion of sentimental discourse with a Romantic one constitutes a predominant element of hidden anti-stylization, or hidden polemic because the latter's transcendentalist, individualistic and masculine themes

5. On account of their historical continuity and widely accepted literary synonymy, I will be using the terms "sentimental" and "Sensibility" interchangeably.

6. M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 189.

and values are especially in tension with the former. A simultaneous element of hidden polemic appears in the tension between the “objective” and masculinist Enlightenment discourse of reason simultaneously endorsed and questioned by the author and the subjectivity and femininity inherent in sentimental discourse. The underlying conflict between the transcendental, idealistic and imaginative themes and values of Romantic discourse and the discourse of reason and social progress constitutes another element of hidden polemic. However, this dimension of internal polemic is especially “hidden,” not only because these two discourses are fused with rhetorical dexterity and fluidity, like the other combinations of discourse, but also because the subjective, individualistic and irrational implications of Romantic discourse are naturally not fully unfolded. By “naturally” I mean both literary-historical and gender determination. A further dimension of hidden polemic is in the conflict within the work’s sentimental discourse itself, manifest in its struggle with some of the central terms of the ideology of Sensibility, or sentimentalism. Since none of these discourses is isolated but merges more or less with the others, the hidden polemic “within” the sentimental style inevitably fuses with the other elements of internal polemic between the sentimental discourse and other discourses. More broadly, each discourse/style in the work becomes dialogized and destabilized 1) because of interaction and interpenetration with the other discourses/styles and the resulting plurality of hidden polemic; 2) because new discursive/stylistic elements are introduced into each discourse not only through this interplay, but also in the form of some discursive innovations.

In the first letter written in Sweden, we have a short glimpse of the synthesis of these three major discourses: “I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart.”<sup>7</sup> Here we have 1) Enlightenment concern for humanity, implicitly involving the author’s revolutionary radicalism (disappointment over the aftermath of the Revolution hailed as the beginning of a better world), 2) Romantic organicism/symbolism (the horrors of a political event envisioned as “casting a gloom over all nature”) embodying the Romantic notion of the correspondence between mind and external world, 3) Sensibility (sorrow for unrequited love combined with sympathy for fellow human beings), all in a single utterance. It is of particular interest that in *Letters*, as in her actual letters, Wollstonecraft often expresses private emotion in terms of what we know as the clichés of the literature of Sensibility, exemplified here by the words, “damped by the

7. 68. All quotations from *Letters* are taken from Richard Holmes’s edition cited above.

tears of disappointed affection." This demonstrates not only the generic character of the subjective utterances of *Letters* as continuous with the literature of Sensibility, but as well displays a fundamental property of the genre: "In all forms of sentimental literature, there is an assumption that life and literature are directly linked . . . through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one. So literary conventions become a way of life . . . literary emotions herald active ones."<sup>8</sup> The autobiographical aspect of *Letters* enhances this notion of the interaction between life and literature by lending sentimental discourse a further dimension of authenticity.

The same letter contains another passage charged with the vocabulary of Sensibility while at the same time displaying some of the basic tropes of Romantic literature and the Enlightenment concern for humanity pervading the whole work:

Some recollections, attached to the idea of home, mingled with reflections respecting the state of society I had been contemplating that evening, *made a tear drop on the rosy cheek I had just kissed; and emotions that trembled on the brink of extacy and agony gave a poignancy to my sensations, which made me feel more alive than usual.*

What are these **imperious sympathies**? How frequently has melancholy and even mysanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as **a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind**;—I was alone, till some **involuntary sympathetic emotion**, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still **a part of a mighty whole**, from which I could not sever myself—not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence which loses its charm in proportion as *the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart.* (69–70; my emphases)

The main element of hidden polemic here is between the discourse of Sensibility and that of Romanticism. The italicized words reproduce the literary discourse of Sensibility with its main theme of intense feeling/sensation directed at a love object. In the first sentence the two objects of affection and passion around which the author constructs her sentimental discourse merge, the one being her daughter Fanny and the other Imlay, Fanny's father, to whom the letters are addressed. Her bodily, emotional and discursive relationship with the one embodies the sphere of maternity, which she had constructed as ideally divorced from what she defined as "sensibility"

8. Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986) 4.

in *Vindication*.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, her discursive relationship with her lover/ addressee embodies the gender role which she had strictly condemned in *Vindication*, defining love in opposition to reason (*Vindication* 30). The comparison is relevant to the extent that it reveals the generically determined character of the author's discourse. Writing from within and across the boundaries of sentimental discourse, the author's voice assimilates its thematic values: "The cult of Sensibility stressed those qualities considered feminine in the sexual psychology of the time: intuitive sympathy, susceptibility, emotionalism and passivity" (Todd 110). Following the expression of feeling embodying these qualities, we observe a discursive transformation of Sensibility into Romanticism. The words emphasized in bold type embody the vocabulary of Romantic discourse as continuous with, yet also distinct from Sensibility. "Sympathy" is one key notion that Romanticism inherited from Sensibility. However, the "sympathies" in question assume meanings and implications that belong to the organicist, transcendentalist tradition of the Romantic sublime as distinct from the notion of social or relational sympathy embedded in sentimental literature.

Although "the eighteenth century is characterized by competing versions of sympathy," it is possible to broadly define it as a "'bridge' between self and other," hence as a bond between the individual and other individuals or his/her community.<sup>10</sup> Initiating the self-conscious introspection that is one of the marks of Romantic discourse, the opening question dialogizes "sympathy." It is no longer a notion of communal bonding between people based on empathy and compassion as in the tradition of Sensibility, but is open to questioning and redefinition, hence, by implication, to plural meanings. Significantly, it has become the plural "sympathies" here. Moreover, "these sympathies" are said to be "imperious," that is, "urgent, imperative." The etymological root of the word "imperious" is "empire," and connotes the notions of power and grandness, which inhere in the Romantic sublime. The discourse of Sensibility is thus destabilized by the new value the word "sympathy" acquires through its change to plural form and modification as "imperious," followed by a discursive exploration of its nature.

The next statement embodies the sharpening of Sensibility in its humanistic dimension to its negative extreme of misanthropy. This can be seen as a critical borderline between Sensibility and Romanticism, if we define Romanticism as a sharpening and concentration of emotional/intellectual, that is, "sentimental" subjectivity in a centralizing "I" which defines itself

9. See, for instance, 68 in Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

10. Lucinda Cole, "(Anti) Feminist Sympathies: The Politics of Relationship in Smith, Wollstonecraft, and More," *English Literary History* 58 (1991): 117, 109.

in opposition to others/society. Romantic sensibility often figures a repression or sublimation of misanthropy through recourse to Enlightenment optimism and humanism or to nature as an extension of these. Rousseau's autobiographical *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, to which the author repeatedly alludes, can be seen as the archetypal narrative of the individual's total isolation from society through misanthropic reaction: "So now I am alone in the world. . . . I would have loved my fellow-men in spite of themselves. It was only by ceasing to be human that they could forfeit my affection."<sup>11</sup> To give another example, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" figures the poetic subject's effort to suppress misanthropy through recourse to nature. It is an effort to gain immunity against and transcend the power of "evil tongues, / rash judgments, [and] the sneers of selfish men."<sup>12</sup> In a typical infiltration of Romantic discourse by Enlightenment scientific discourse, Wollstonecraft expresses her sense of total isolation through the metaphor, "a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind." This is suggestive of the solipsistic extreme of Romantic alienation, and echoes Rousseau's similar lament, "Wrenched somehow out of the natural order, I have been plunged into an incomprehensible chaos" (*Reveries* 27). However, in *Letters* the negative sense of detachment is immediately rectified, or compensated by the Romantic sense of organic unity with the universe, figured through an analogy between sympathy and the physical law of adhesion: "some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole." The sense of communal bonding inherent in the notion of sympathy belonging to the tradition of Sensibility is thus replaced by the sense of transcendent unity of being central to Romantic discourse. The return to the discourse of Sensibility and the feminine vulnerability inscribed in it at the end of the quotation (emphasized by italics) is thus destabilized by the Romantic notion of the individual being part of an infinite and infinitely powerful whole. The tension between cosmic consciousness and emotionalism inscribed in this utterance is one of the most marked instances of internal polemic between Romantic and sentimental discourses in *Letters*.

Implicit in this tension is the germ of the conflict between the Romantic "I" and sentimental relationality, which entails the constant erosion of the boundaries of the ego in favor of unity with another. The sense of Romantic detachment and otherness discerned in this passage is never fully articulated by the author, always returning to sentimental relationality after repeated gestures of Romantic empowerment. Anne Mellor has argued that

11. Quoted from "First Walk" in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (London: Penguin, 1979) 27.

12. William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. John Morley (London: MacMillan, 1950) 94.

in ‘masculine’ Romanticism . . . [t]he principle of polarity, of Fichte’s ego versus non-ego, of thesis versus antithesis, requires the construction of an Other which is seen as a threat to the originating subject. At both the theoretical and the psychological level, the women writers of the Romantic period resisted this model of oppositional polarity (as the foundation of both the natural and human worlds) for one based on sympathy and likeness. (*Romanticism and Gender* 3)

It is indisputable that Wollstonecraft resisted the hierarchical oppositions of subject/object and I/other inherent in masculine Romanticism, inherited from the Enlightenment, in her non-didactic works. However, also as Margaret Homans maintains with reference to women writers of the Romantic period, as a woman, she could not have possibly developed a fully masculine Romantic subjectivity, even if she had lived long enough to witness and participate in the flowering of Romanticism itself; for “the literary tradition betrays a masculine point of view that is oppressive to women . . . that masculine bias manifests itself as much in structures of thought and of language as in overt discussions of gender roles.”<sup>13</sup> Thus the relationality that dominates the subjective discourse of *Letters* is not only a positive writing of Sensibility, but also, by the same token, a negative writing, or failure of masculine Romanticism.

The final utterance of the above-quoted passage illustrates this point by reverting to the discursive terms of Sensibility evinced by the thought of suicide (which is later revealed to have been caused by disappointment in love), despite the fact that suicide is rejected or deferred through Romantic empowerment: “I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself—not . . . by snapping the thread of an existence. . . .” The literal inscription of sentimental discourse at the end of the utterance is evidence of the tentativeness of the Romantic empowerment which dialogizes the sentimental in the very same utterance. Suicidal thoughts constitute a motif central to the value system and plot of sentimental fiction, in which death is presented as the natural and sublime relief for the sensitive soul overburdened by emotional distress. Werther and Clarissa die as a necessity dictated by the logic of the genre which envisions only two possibilities, especially for the heroine, either death or middle-class virtue realized in domesticity: “the chaste suffering woman [is] happily rewarded in marriage or elevated into redemptive death” (Todd 4). Julie in Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* successfully, though painfully, makes the leap from impossible love entailing death to the security and content provided by a calm marriage. In the inconclusive ending that Godwin appended to Wollstone-

13. Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980) 9.

craft's unfinished novel, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, which she had apparently written tentatively, because there are several extant notes in outline form intended as ending, the heroine attempts suicide, again, apparently after having been deserted by her lover, Darnford (this is explicitly stated in one of the outlines of plot). But having been saved, she decides to "live for [her] child," found and brought to her by Jemima.<sup>14</sup> This ending anti-stylizes the fixed plot of sentimental fiction in that it shifts the vital love-object from lover to child.

The autobiographical nature of *Letters* prompts the reader to refer to the facts in Wollstonecraft's life and observe, in connection with this passage in *Letters*, the parallel between her life and this ending of *Maria*. We learn from Godwin's *Memoirs* that Wollstonecraft either attempted or only contemplated suicide after having been deserted by Imlay: "She formed a desperate purpose to die. . . . It was perhaps owing to [Imlay's] activity and representations, that her life was, at the time, saved" (Holmes 248). At the time Fanny, her illegitimate daughter by Imlay, was one year old. Enacting the continuity between life and literature inscribed in the assumptions of sentimental literature itself, Wollstonecraft's conduct thus, in a way, almost realized the generic pattern of "either middle-class virtue or death." In other words, Wollstonecraft enacted in her own life the generically determined logic of sentimental literature that extreme Sensibility, which necessarily overrides the boundaries of middle-class norms of propriety, leads to death. Indeed, it seems that the underlying ethical project of sentimental literature is to contain extreme Sensibility in women, that is female desire, within the limits of middle-class propriety.<sup>15</sup> However, in *Letters*, which embodies the inherent intertextuality of life and "*lettres*," or literature, Wollstonecraft tries to transcend the weakness and determinism involved in Sensibility as psychic state and as discourse by means of a Romantic discourse with a higher valuation of the creative subject and her/his place in the universe.

This dynamic of anti-stylization of sentimental discourse unfolds mainly through the author's persistent dwelling on imagination as the primary aesthetic-ethical value on which to build life and art. This is one of *Letters'* obvious features which make it a cultural-literary document embodying, in a fragmentary and tentative way, the transition from Sensibility to Romanticism as the dominant genre of subjectivity. Maurice Bowra has located the emphasis on imagination as the most distinctive feature of Romanticism: If "we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates

14. *Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary/Maria and Mary Shelley*, Mathilda, ed. Janet Todd (New York: New York UP, 1992) 147-48.

15. Christine Roulston, *Virtue, Gender, and the Authentic Self in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Richardson, Rousseau, and Laclos* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998) xix.

the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they took of it."<sup>16</sup> In *Letters* the author makes many rhetorical attempts to define imagination as a transcendent value that supplants neither the normative terms of Sensibility, such as the heart, feeling, sympathy, benevolence and sentiment, nor those of Enlightenment, such as reason and judgment, but must operate with them in order to produce the model of complete man and civilization which she envisions:

Without the aid of the *imagination* all the pleasures of the senses must sink into grossness, unless continual novelty serve as a substitute for the imagination . . . who will deny that the *imagination and understanding* have made many, very many *discoveries* since those days, which only seem the harbingers of others still more *noble and beneficial*. I never met with much *imagination* amongst people who had not acquired a habit of *reflection*; and in that state of society in which the *judgment and taste* are not called forth, and formed by *the cultivation of the arts and sciences*, little of that **delicacy of feeling and thinking** is to be found **characterized by the word sentiment**. (Letter Two, 72–73; my emphases)

Again, within the compass of a single sentence we have a synthesis of three discourses. The words emphasized with italics inscribe a synthesis of the dominant Enlightenment discourse of reason and progress and the Romantic discourse of imagination as the supreme faculty of the mind. In the last sentence the Enlightenment root of both Romanticism and Sensibility is emphasized through the notion that both “sentiment” and “imagination” have their source in the cultivation of the intellect, represented by “reflection,” “judgment and taste” and “the cultivation of the arts and sciences.” The words in bold type represent here Sensibility. The Enlightenment values based on reason merge with the Romantic emphasis on imagination, and finally this fusion is presented as the condition of authentic Sensibility. While in *Vindication* Wollstonecraft counters sensualism and false Sensibility mainly with reason and understanding,<sup>17</sup> here she appropriates imagination as not only an aid to reason but as the *sine qua non* counterpart to reason in the unfolding of the full capacities of man, whose most noble aim is presented as the advancement of mankind and civilization. Note, at the same time, the primary importance attributed to imagination in the whole utterance, and in its prior positioning in the couple “imagination and understanding.”

16. C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1950) 1.

17. See, for instance, 30, 63, 64–65, 75, 183.

Imagination is made to serve thus as the mediating term between reason and Sensibility, respectively represented by "understanding" and "sentiment." The polemic hidden in this reconciliation is double: the humanitarian concern with the progress and welfare of mankind and the objectivist, rationalist and materialist principles underlying this concern are in tension, on the one hand, with the subjective character of imagination as the locus of the private, the unconscious, the irrational and of individualistic impulses and, on the other hand, with the subjective and anti-social quality of Sensibility. Marilyn Butler's comment on a pivotal sentence in Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* succinctly reveals the fundamental difference both between Enlightenment and Romanticism and between Enlightenment and Sensibility as a major source of Romanticism: "in its context that very sentence has Wordsworth, like a true son of Enlightenment, putting rational thought, moral intention and social utility above the subjective, emotional side of the mind, and above the claims of self-expression."<sup>18</sup> The moral and political tendency of Sensibility was at best vague because, on the one hand, it was concerned with subjectivity, which "was a social practice paradoxically pretending to be extra-social,"<sup>19</sup> and, on the other hand, it generally supported the status quo through its discourses of sympathy, compassion, benevolence and charity in conflict with the egalitarian and materialist Enlightenment discourses.<sup>20</sup> Romanticism as it came to unfold was also antithetical to Enlightened progressivism.<sup>21</sup> Hence the valorization not only of imagination but also of Sensibility in its emphatic presentation as the goal of "the cultivation of the arts and the sciences" at the end of the passage vibrates with underlying conceptual conflicts.

The tensions that inhabit the fusion of discursive forms under scrutiny are an inherent quality of what Bakhtin terms the "internally dialogized hybrid":

The . . . internally dialogized hybrid possesses a syntactic structure utterly specific to it: in it, within the boundaries of a single utterance, two potential utterances are fused, two responses are, as it were, harnessed in a potential dialogue. It is true that these potential responses can never be fused into finished utterances, but their insufficiently de-

18. Marilyn Butler quoted in Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 77.

19. Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992) 10.

20. Stephen Cox, "Sensibility As Argument," *Sensibility in Transformation*, ed. Conger 80; Cole 133.

21. Marshall Brown, "Romanticism and Enlightenment," *The Cambridge Companion To British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 26.

veloped forms are nevertheless acutely felt in the syntactic construction of the double-voiced hybrid.<sup>22</sup>

The passages discussed here, especially the ones from Letters One and Two are striking examples of such incomplete fusion, which makes it possible to mark each discursive form within an utterance.

Letter Ten contains another central passage embodying anti-stylization of Sensibility through appropriation of Romantic imagination: “This is not the first time I have remarked heart without sentiment: they are distinct. The former depends on the rectitude of the feelings, on truth of sympathy . . . the latter has a higher source; call it imagination, genius, or what you will” (128). In place of the opposition between authentic Sensibility and false Sensibility implicitly established in *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft constructs here an opposition between authentic Sensibility and transcendent imagination. “The rectitude of feelings” and “truth of sympathy” are defined as the basis of Sensibility, metonymically represented by “heart” as in the tradition of Sensibility, and are counterposed against “sentiment,” which is attributed a “higher source” called “imagination” or “genius.” The opposition between Sensibility and “sentiment” is in turn contained within a formula that uses, while at the same time inverting, the pivotal terms of the discourse of Sensibility by means of the word “without”; “heart without sentiment.” Ultimately, the hybrid structure created through the fusion of inverted “Sensibility” and “imagination” internally dialogizes both.

In a typical combination of observation of the people/scenes, abstraction and personal feeling, Wollstonecraft ends this passage and the letter with a continued valorization of imagination: “I must fly from thought, and find refuge from sorrow in a strong imagination—the only solace for a feeling heart” (128). Again imagination is implicitly accorded a higher status than reason, and is even presented as the only compensation for the corrosive effect of Sensibility, represented by “a feeling heart.” Imagination emerges not only as the cure of Sensibility but also as the sublime agency that can endow the feeling subject with transcendence:

Phantoms of bliss! ideal forms of excellence! Again enclose me in your magic circle, and wipe clear from my remembrance the disappointments which render the sympathy painful, which experience rather increases than damps; by giving the indulgence of feeling the sanction of reason. (128–29)

22. Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Arnold, 1994) 118.

Romantic imagination, defined here in Platonic terms, is invoked again as the supreme faculty, under whose supervision reason can sanction feeling by validating its otherwise fruitless "indulgence." Once again, imagination displaces true Sensibility—which Wollstonecraft had formulated as "the language of the heart" in *Vindication* in opposition to "sensual reveries" and "romantic feelings" (94, 11, 75)—as the higher source of subjectivity.

Even more far-reaching in its implications for the Enlightenment rationalism which constitutes the subversive core of all of Wollstonecraft's works through her appropriation of reason for women is the overt supremacy attributed to imagination in the implicitly hierarchical assessment of mental faculties, and the attendant subordination of reason to imagination: it is the invoked "phantoms of bliss," "ideal forms of excellence" which are envisioned as capable of *giving* "the sanction of reason" to "the indulgence of feeling." Therefore we have here double anti-stylization: Romantic discourse anti-stylizes both rationalistic Enlightenment discourse and the discourse of Sensibility by inserting a third term into the existing opposition between reason and Sensibility, and thereby reconciles them. Such reconciliation had been impossible within the binary scheme of *Vindication*, based on the assumption of the antithetical relation of reason and Sensibility.

In Letter Twelve, hidden polemic dialogizes Sensibility further in one of the most confessional passages in the book:

How illusive, perhaps the most so, are the plans of happiness founded on virtue and principle. . . . The satisfaction arising from conscious rectitude, will not calm an injured heart, when tenderness is ever finding excuses; and self-applause is a cold solitary feeling, that cannot supply the place of disappointed affection, without throwing a gloom over every prospect, which, banishing pleasure, does not exclude pain. I reasoned and reasoned; but my heart was too full to allow me to remain in the house, and I walked, till I was wearied out, to purchase rest—or rather forgetfulness. (135–36)

This, I think, is a remarkable passage in its deftness and sincerity in combining abstract reflection with personal feeling. The criticism directed at the middle-class ethic of "virtue," always problematically appropriated by the genre of Sensibility, implicitly questions its valorization in the ethical and literary discourses of Sensibility: virtue does not do away with the agitations of the heart, and so does not lead to happiness, possible only through satisfaction of desire. The dichotomy of pleasure and pain which underlies the idea that absence of pleasure (unfulfilled desire) does not exclude pain is a Lockean notion: "Locke held the belief that later came to be

known as ‘psychological hedonism,’ according to which all action is in some way directed towards pleasure or the avoidance of pain.”<sup>23</sup> What Wollstonecraft formulates in terms of a psycho-social conflict is also inscribed in sentimental literature as the dilemma between feminine desire and the socially imposed norm of virtue: Julie in *Héloïse* becomes virtuous and content, but not happy because she acquires content precisely through suppression of her desire for St. Preux. Clarissa technically loses her virtue but achieves catharsis by refusing earthly happiness and by willing her own death. Charlotte in *The Sorrows of Werther* remains virtuous and becomes unhappy because of her desire for Werther.

Seen from this angle, Sensibility emerges as a discursive practice not in conflict with the male-biased structures of thought informing Enlightenment, but as continuous with them because it essentially perpetuates Enlightenment’s asymmetrically gendered value system, although ostensibly reversing its valorization of masculinity:

In the Enlightenment’s gendering of intellectual and cultural values, woman as desiring subject often represented ‘unreason.’ . . . The cult of Sensibility, or sentimentalism . . . developed the two themes of subjectivity and domesticity in a wide-ranging feminization of culture in the 1770s and 1780s, to some extent in opposition to the masculinist values of the Enlightenment. Woman is defined as domestic in order to confine her there, in contrast to negative figures of femininity. (Kelly 15, 18)

Sentimental literature embodies this effort to contain the feminine excess which is in desire and in its consequence, madness. In Wollstonecraft’s actual letters to Imlay, madness looms as a real threat that is contained within a rationally controlled sentimentality, checked in each slide into irrationality: “It is time for me to grow more reasonable, a few more of these caprices of sensibility would destroy me.”<sup>24</sup> In *Letters*, the threat of “unreason” is simultaneously suppressed and revealed through an increasingly conspicuous discursive effort, a laborious negotiation with the terms of the discourse of Sensibility and reason. The words, “I reasoned and reasoned” paradoxically point to the “unreason” threatening one, especially an “abandoned woman,” who reasons too much because of her anguish and pressing need for emotional and, considering her situation as a single parent, socio-economic security. Note how, in Letter Eight, she mixes an account of the poor economic condition of lower-class Norwegian women and the

23. Philippa Foot, “Locke, Hume, and Modern Moral Theory: A Legacy of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Philosophies of Mind,” *The Languages of Psyche: Mind and Body in Enlightenment Thought*, ed. G. S. Rousseau (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 83.

24. “Letter x1” in *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford: Polity P, 1989) 237.

legal practice of obliging the father of an illegitimate child to maintain the child in joint responsibility with the mother with expression of her own emotional devastation, conveyed via the sympathy she felt for such an abandoned young woman (114–15). In Letter Thirteen, Wollstonecraft explicitly articulates the sharpened conflict within her between reason, moral wisdom and Sensibility verging on madness: “where is truth or rather principle to be found? These are, perhaps, the vapourings of a heart ill at ease—the effusions of a sensibility wounded almost to madness” (141). Godwin significantly characterized Wollstonecraft as “a female Werter” with reference to her “most exquisite and delicious sensibility” and constitutional vulnerability (*Memoirs* 242). This epithet applies to her also with regard to the sentimental persona she created in *Letters*, where she, like Werther, confessionally displays the innermost movements of her soul. The parallels to Werther are charged with gender asymmetry, though, but this is not immediately relevant to my present task.

Wollstonecraft's recurrent reflection on reason and virtue as in conflict with Sensibility involves an implicit questioning of the whole middle-class ethos based on these values: “‘Reason’ and ‘virtue’ commonly represent the intellectual and moral training used to subjugate women within professional middle-class culture and to secure them against seduction from above or contamination from below” (Kelly 18). By questioning the meaning and pragmatic value of reason and virtue for the female individual of Sensibility, *Letters* anti-stylizes the ethical discourse of Sensibility insofar as it foregrounds virtue as one of its pivotal values, and is explicitly or implicitly coupled with and supported by reason, even though reason is in direct conflict with its emotive values. Wollstonecraft would later offer her sharpest and most explicit critique of the sentimental ethic in *Maria*: “woman, weak in reason, impotent in will, is required to moralize and sentimentalize herself to stone and pine her life away” by being obliged to suppress desire within and, of course, also outside marriage (114). The critical estimation of Sensibility in its problematic relation to middle-class values continues in the following: “Friendship and domestic happiness are continually praised; yet how little is there of either in the world, because it requires more cultivation of mind to keep awake affection, even in our own hearts, than the common run of people suppose” (136). This sentence deconstructs the essentialistic assumptions underlying Sensibility itself: love and affection are at least partly mental constructs that are in need of continual cultivation for permanence. The psychic *need* for what we call “love” may be given, something we are born with, but love itself is something we must define, hence create and maintain through understanding and self-knowledge. This relates to what Wollstonecraft calls “active sensibility and positive virtue” in *Maria* (114).

Letter Twenty Two contains another passage in which reason and Sensibility are presented as incompatible and in continual conflict with each other:

I fell into reveries, thinking, by way of excuse, that enlargement of mind and refined feelings are of little use, but to barb the arrows of sorrow which waylay us every where, eluding the sagacity of wisdom, and rendering principles unavailing, if considered as a breast-work to secure our own hearts. (182)

In a letter Wollstonecraft wrote “to a friend, to whom she commanded her manuscript,” attached to the “Author’s Preface” in *Maria*, we find a similar utterance:

For my part, I cannot suppose any situation more distressing, than for a woman of sensibility, with an improving mind, to be bound to such a man as I have described for life; obliged to renounce all the humanizing affections, and to avoid cultivating her taste, lest her perception of grace and refinement of sentiment, should sharpen to agony the pangs of disappointment. (59)

The intertextuality between *Letters* and *Maria* is relevant insofar as *Maria* embodies a forceful anti-stylization of Sensibility, a pervasive attack on the structures of thought that enforce the sentimental feminization and attendant devaluation of women. As an anti-stylization it necessarily incorporates a stylization of Sensibility as well, most visible in the self-portrayal of Maria as a woman of Sensibility and in her relationship with Darnford, built around their interactive reading of *Héloïse*, which “constitutes the field wherein Maria’s desire is activated and literalized.”<sup>25</sup>

A more direct element of hidden polemic in the above-quoted sentence from *Letters* is embedded in its allusion to Rousseau: the word “reveries” recurs throughout the book and signals Romantic imagination set against both reason (“enlargement of mind”) and Sensibility (“refined feelings”). The philosophical basis of the implied opposition between imagination and reason in this utterance lies in the fact that “[e]ver since Descartes, the principle that the soul always thinks had been espoused by Enlightenment rationalists and empiricists alike” (Brown 39). This opposition as formulated in *Letters* involves an affirmation of daydreaming, which is a product of the imagination, as a non-pragmatic or “useless” activity of the mind that can well substitute reason and Sensibility, since the cultivation of these increases the harmful effects of Sensibility rather than making the female subject

25. Daniel O’Quinn, “Trembling: Wollstonecraft, Godwin and the Resistance to Literature,” *English Literary History* 64 (1997): 774.

more wise and virtuous. "Reverie—empty dreaming or daydreaming—was at its most fashionable around the 1780s, with writers like Rousseau and William Cowper" (Brown 39). The allusions to *Reveries* include statements such as "I hastened out of the house, to take my *solitary evening's walk*" (115; my emphasis), in which the author appropriates Rousseau's self-image of the man of Sensibility estranged from society, seeking refuge in benevolent nature. The crucial difference between the two texts is that Rousseau's account of his "solitary reveries" points to the full potential of masculine Romantic subjectivity, whose apex is the belief in the God-like autonomy of the creative mind: "What is the source of our happiness in such a state? Nothing external to us . . . as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God" (88–89). Like Rousseau and the other pre-Romantics, Wollstonecraft does not tell her reveries (Brown 39). However in contrast to them, she is only able to define her reveries negatively, as an activity that she must excuse to herself and indulge in default of the usefulness of the cultivation of mind and feeling.

The sharpest expression of the conflict between reason/virtue—a conceptual compound which Wollstonecraft repeatedly formulates as "principles"—and Sensibility is to be found in Letter Six, where the dire consequences of the conflict are projected onto Fanny as a future woman:

I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard—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! (97)

This is a central passage in which Sensibility is explicitly, that is, in open polemic, opposed to the author's feminism. In the spirit of Godwinian rationalist materialism it exposes Sensibility as a mental condition which is a product of education, the cultivation of which may render the female subject too vulnerable and unfit for survival in society. Significantly, this "fact" is always reflected/refracted in sentimental literature as "the impasse of self and society" (Kelly 50). There is also a hidden polemic here in that the author's feminist evaluation of the oppression of women is carried out through the very language of Sensibility, which she had condemned as a male-biased discourse in *Vindication*, as part and parcel of the cultural practice of "giving a sex to mind" and thus subordinating women (42).

Wollstonecraft strives, by fits and starts, to transcend the feminine victimhood inherent in Sensibility through Romantic empowerment. Two

pages after the above-quoted passage, which reveals the precariousness of Sensibility as a psycho-social and cultural position, she finds harbor in organic nature as a source, not only of the beautiful and sublime, but first of all, of “sentiment.” The vocabulary of Sensibility glides clearly into that of Romanticism:

Nature is the nurse of sentiment,—the true source of taste;—yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beauteous feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to extasy, just as the chords are touched, like the aeolian harp agitated by the changing wind. (99)

The idea of the correspondance between mind and world glimpsed in the first quotation from Letter One is fully developed here and explicitly stated through such phrases as “animated nature,” “responsive sympathy” and the movements of “the harmonized soul” likened to “the aeolian harp agitated by the changing wind,” a figure which would become one of the recurrent tropes of Romantic poetry. So far the combination of Sensibility and Romanticism seems unproblematical and therefore not polemically divided. However, the final sentence of the paragraph fully reveals the polemic hidden in such a combination:

But how dangerous is it to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence; and how difficult to eradicate them when an affection for mankind, a passion for an individual, is but the unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful. (99)

In other words, the empowerment to be derived from the Romantic sublime can be achieved only conditionally and precariously. It is “dangerous to foster these sentiments” of refined and extreme Sensibility fusing with Romantic perception and awareness (“misery, as well as rapture” caused “by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime”) “when an affection for mankind” (Enlightenment humanism) and “a passion for an individual” (Sensibility) is the mode in which love of the beautiful and sublime manifests itself. To translate this into contemporary critical discourse, when the love of the sublime is not freed from affectivity and relationality, Romantic empowerment cannot be fully achieved.

At the end of Letter Six, immediately after this passage, another attempt is made at fusing Sensibility with the Romantic sublime, this time “successfully,” that is, with minimum internal polemic:

Emotions become sentiments; and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent, by fondly retracing them. . . . Fate has sep-

arated me from another [friend], the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs, sublime emotions absorb my soul. (99–100)

Sensibility (“passion for an individual”) is affirmed and fused with Romantic transcendence through the sublime, whose source is presented as nature (“when gazing on these tremendous cliffs”). Imaginative memory in turn is presented as the vehicle of such transformation involving the notion of permanence inherent in transcendence. Memory is a pivotal agent of Romantic epistemology, for it is conceived as transforming both perception and the activity of imagination into self-knowledge: “the great Romantic poets all know themselves by remembering what they have experienced” (Brown 43).

The final utterance of the whole work appropriating the sublime unequivocally expresses Romantic exultation and harmony in the penultimate letter:

In fancy I return to a favourite spot, where I seemed to have retired from man and wretchedness; but the din of trade drags me back to all the care I left behind, when lost in sublime emotions. Rocks aspiring towards the heavens, and, as it were, shutting out sorrow, surrounded me, whilst peace appeared to steal along the lake to calm my bosom, modulating the wind that agitated the neighbouring poplars. (195)

The transcendence that is anthropomorphically attributed to sublime nature (“Rocks aspiring towards the heavens”)—a typical trope of Romantic literature—is imaged as “shutting out sorrow,” hence endowing the Romantic subject who is part of this “mighty whole” with immunity to the destructive power of Sensibility. The final sentence reverses the Romantic motif of the wind causing “sympathetic” motions in man and nature alike—a motif which found two of its best examples in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” and Coleridge’s “Aeolian Harp”—in that it is “peace” that comes along the lake “to calm” the author’s “bosom, modulating the wind that agitated” the nearby flowers. The foregrounding of the female body and the feminine need for healing and security figured by the projected image of rocks creating a closed, protected space softens and feminizes the sense of the sublime inscribed in this utterance. Poetic utterances such as this one constitute a lyrical practice actualizing the Romantic theory inscribed in the words, “How often do my feelings produce ideas that remind me of the origin of many poetical fictions. In solitude, the imagination bodies forth its conceptions unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation” (119). This notion of the autonomy of the mind in poetic activity forms the basis of the Romantic theory of imagination:

While ‘fancy’ depends upon a relationship between mind and nature, ‘imagination’ is defined by the power of its language precisely not to remain imitatively and repetitively true to sense perception. This language is empowered to produce appearances ‘for the gratification of the mind in contemplating the image itself.’<sup>26</sup>

The sense of Romantic empowerment inscribed in these utterances are in tension with the vulnerability and weakness embodied by the more typical utterances of Sensibility, which in turn are in tension with both the discourse of reason and the sentimental discourse of virtue. From this angle, *Letters* acts as a correction of the prescribed virtue and wisdom of *Vindication*, or rather a test of its premises applied to an actual “feeling heart.” In her Introduction to *Vindication* Wollstonecraft formulated her aim in writing it as contributing to the formation of a virtuous, human personality in women in opposition to their present femininity fostered and sustained by the genteel culture of sentimentalism, or Sensibility. Her aim, in short, was the remasculinization of culture, which she saw as possible only through a relative masculinization of women:<sup>27</sup>

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt. (*Vindication* 9)

In light of the forceful and pervasive attack on Sensibility as ideological discourse and literary genre which Wollstonecraft makes in *Vindication*, the discursive valorization and reproduction of Sensibility in *Letters* come to be seen as highly ironic and even self-defeating. However, to see the “slip” back to Sensibility as self-defeating regression would be reductive and wrong because the validity or truth of each work can only be evaluated with reference to its own way of constructing reality: “Each genre is only able to control certain definite aspects of reality. Each genre possesses definite principles of selection, definite forms for seeing and conceptualization of reality, and a definite scope and depth of penetration” (*Bakhtin Reader* 177). *Vindication* is a polemical treatise aimed at changing what it sees as present reality through reformation of social/discursive practice. It is

26. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 53.

27. Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentalism in the 1790s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 39, 45.

"a political manifesto written against the discourse of sensibility as a model for gender relations."<sup>28</sup> As such it fully embodies the Enlightenment endeavor to suppress the subjective side of the human mind and the "lower faculties" associated with femininity and subjectivity (Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft* xxx). In Catriona Mackenzie's rendering, Wollstonecraft "allies . . . self-governance with hierarchical opposites between soul/body, reason/passion, and masculine/feminine. The supposedly sex-neutral 'self' that controls the body is thus implicitly associated with 'masculine' virtues while downgrading 'feminine' virtues associated with affectivity."<sup>29</sup> This is a generic necessity because "[a]s a genre, feminist expository prose inevitably embeds itself in the misogynistic tradition it seeks to address and redress."<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, in *Vindication* Wollstonecraft tries to redeem affectivity by repeatedly positioning the affections in opposition to Sensibility, and by implicitly defining them as the source and exercise of authentic Sensibility: "I am persuaded that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation . . . I am not now talking of momentary flashes of sensibility, but of affections" (*Vindication* 66). She valorizes thus the affections and the passions in opposition to what she terms "mere . . . sensibility" in a text which aims to appropriate reason and understanding for the education of women (*Vindication* 126). This is also an instance of hidden anti-stylization, of a "discourse sens[ing] alongside itself another . . . discourse" (Bakhtin, *Dostoyevsky* 196). In other words, the rationalist discourse of *Vindication* itself is developed against the countercurrent of the discourse of Sensibility, which erodes and subverts the very premises underlying it at every turn. As a text which radically denies, suppresses and denigrates the female body, it is full of loopholes, the most striking of which is its valorization, towards the end, of female erotic desire: "true voluptuousness must proceed from the mind—for what can equal the sensations produced by mutual affection, supported by mutual respect?" (192). Through strategic displacement the mind is presented as the "true" locus, even of bodily desire.

By contrast, those utterances of *Letters* embodying private emotion display the generic qualities of sentimental writing valorizing subjectivity, femininity and affectivity. The valorization of these values involves the anti-Enlightenment premise that "in theory, if not in practice . . . 'dear sensibility' is a state of being that cuts across the usual mind/body and

28. Ewa Badowska, "The Anorexic Body of Liberal Feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 17 (1998): 283.

29. Catriona Mackenzie, "Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Hypatia* 8 (1993): 37.

30. Susan Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One,'" *Feminist Studies*, 00463663, 20.3 (1994): 6.

I/thou divides of the day” (Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft* xviii). The emphasis on sympathy, love and passion in *Letters* shares this tendency of Sensibility, thereby countering the masculinist dichotomies endorsed by *Vindication*. Hence the intertextual contradictions and conflicts between *Letters* and *Vindication* belong not to a pure realm of ideology but arise from the inherent differences between genres as ideological form in the Bakhtinian sense: “Every significant genre is a complex system of means and methods for the conscious control and finalization of reality. . . . The artist must learn to see reality with the eyes of the genre. A particular aspect of reality can only be understood in connection with the particular means of representing it” (*Bakhtin Reader* 178, 179). This is equivalent to the stylization of a given genre. Despite its forceful dynamics of anti-stylization, *Letters* becomes more and more intensely sentimental in style, which involves a creative reproduction of the conventional “tasks” of sentimental literature.

The passage which ends letter Twenty Two exemplifies this. Here the author covertly refers to her discovery that Imlay had started living with another woman:

I . . . received the cruelest of disappointments, last spring, in returning to my home. . . . Know you of what materials some hearts are made? I play the child, and weep at the recollection—for the grief is still fresh that stunned as well as wounded me—yet never did drops of anguish like these bedew the cheeks of infantine innocence—and why should they mine, that never were stained by a blush of guilt? Innocent and credulous as a child, why have I not the same happy thoughtlessness? (189)

Stylization of sentimental discourse involves here the adoption of what Mitzi Myers terms “sensibility as literary and behavioral cliché” (133) for the very purpose of authenticity. Clichés such as “cruelest disappointment,” “drops of anguish bedew[ing] the cheeks of infantine innocence,” cheeks not “stained by a blush of guilt,”—hackneyed words which served as the vehicles of what Wollstonecraft condemned as the artificial language of Sensibility in *Vindication* (94) and *Mary* (6)—function here as a means of conveying what is presented as fresh, acutely felt experience. If we did not have the biographical data that stamp it as authentic, how could we distinguish between authentic and inauthentic experience with reference to such clichés? The answer must be that we could not. However, the distinction itself overlooks the generic investment of sentimental discourse in cliché: authentic feeling is assumed to be embodied by a language which is essentially formulaic because the experiences to which it gives expression are mostly formulaic in character.

Another element of stylization of sentimental discourse here is the author's rhetorical appropriation of virtue, which is essential to her (re-)construction of herself as a female persona of Sensibility: "in the sentimental narrative, the loss is that of feminine virtue, which the act of writing is repeatedly seeking to reconstitute" (Roulston xvi). Hence Wollstonecraft's claim of "infantine innocence" echoing the very traits of stereotypical immaturity and emotional dependence she had so harshly condemned in *Vindication* as "contemptible infantine airs" and "amiable weaknesses" (II, 34). Significantly, here she is presenting *herself* as amiably weak in order to regain the love of her "unfaithful" lover. This is part of the more general rhetorical drive of Sensibility adopted in *Letters*, which "tends to equate intellectual authority with the power to display or elicit emotional susceptibility" (Cox 64). An element of anti-stylization at this point lies in the fact that it is the female author defining herself as a persona of Sensibility who is endeavoring to regain the love of her lover, while the conventional situation of sentimental literature in terms of sexual roles is the reverse. In this sense Wollstonecraft is actually acting as "a female Werter" against the norm of "passive virtue" idealized in women in sentimental literature (Todd, *Sensibility* 20), reflecting and reinforcing the same norm in social life.

Elements of anti-stylization constantly contend with those of stylization. In one of the passages in which Imlay is directly addressed, the author justifies her desire for him through presentation of her own nature as extremely susceptible to love. In addition she appropriates the quality of modesty, coupled in the sentimental tradition with the norm of feminine virtue, in connection with erotic desire:

You have sometimes wondered, my dear friend, at the extreme affection of my nature—But such is the temperature of my soul. . . . Tokens of love which I have received have rapt me in elysium—purifying the heart they enchanted.—My bosom still glows. . . . if I blush at recollecting past enjoyment, it is the rosy hue of pleasure heightened by modesty; for the blush of modesty and shame are as distinct as the emotions by which they are produced. (III)

In this passage Wollstonecraft manages to justify at once Sensibility and female desire. The desire which is systematically suppressed in sentimental literature is boldly admitted and exulted over through the strategy of coupling it with modesty. Hence desire and virtue are reconciled in a way that subverts the moral basis of sentimental literature centered on woman's chastity. In other words, while Wollstonecraft rhetorically endorses the moral and aesthetic value of virtue in recreating herself as a persona of Sen-

sibility, an element of internal polemic divides the utterances expressive of innocence and virtue, making them double-voiced.

The question arises of whether Wollstonecraft could have chosen another discourse for reconstructing her subjectivity. Tilottama Rajan suggests that the answer must be negative: like her heroine in *Mary*, who is intended by her as a subversive heroine, but who cannot escape the conventional plot of Sensibility, Wollstonecraft “is also attracted to the tradition of sensibility, because it offers her the only literary discourse that values feminine qualities.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, again, like *Mary*, Wollstonecraft’s subjectivity was to a considerable extent socially and culturally constructed in accordance with the generic norms of Sensibility. What is inscribed in *Letters* is this partly ideologically, partly psychically created subjectivity: “*Mary* . . . institutionalizes a certain representation of women as doomed to fail because of their innately sentimental nature. Yet this ‘nature’ is itself developed within the social text of which *Mary* is a part, and which assigns women the genre of sensibility” (Rajan 227). Hence Wollstonecraft’s “choice” of genre is not personal or arbitrary but culturally and historically determined. On the other hand, all authors in all ages are bound by the conventions of the genres available to them, and their originality consists of anti-stylization and/or parodic subversion of the given genres.

Sentimental literature also developed and defined itself in opposition to existing genres. Somehow conflating in her formulation sentimental literature’s self-perception with its critical assessment, Christine Roulston writes:

the sentimental novel has been seen as forming a radical departure from other genres, asserting, in Leo Braudy’s terms, “the superiority of the inarticulate language of the heart to the artifice of literature and social forms” and hence defining itself by a rejection of formal literary artifice, “oppos[ing] intuition to rationality; disjuncture, episode, and effusion to continuity and plot; artlessness and sincerity to art and literary calculation; and emotion to verbal communication.” (xv)

We find the clearest discursive endorsement of these claims in Rousseau’s “Dialogue on the Subject of Romances,” which serves as an introduction to *Héloïse*. He characterizes his characters as “[t]wo or three young people, simple, if you will, but sensible, who, mutually expressing the real sentiments of their hearts, have no intention to display wit. . . . They are children, and therefore think like children.”<sup>32</sup> Rousseau idealizes thus what

31. Tilottama Rajan, “Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel,” *SiR* 27 (1988): 227.

32. Rousseau, *Eloïsa, or a Series of Original Letters*, trans. William Kenrick (1803; Oxford: Woodstock, 1989) xix.

Wollstonecraft, probably under the influence of Rousseau, also valorizes as "infantine innocence" (Wollstonecraft's phrase) to the point of presenting them as noble savages who are edenically isolated from the corrupt world and its conventions. Although the characters display extraordinary skill in verbal expression and communication, Rousseau says that they think like children in order to rhetorically position their innocence in antithetical relation to what Braudy terms "the artifice of literature and social forms."<sup>33</sup> He admits that they "presume to philosophise," yet their philosophizing is nothing but innocence "versed [only] in the art of love" (xix). "The real sentiments of their hearts" is opposed to "wit," that is, verbal skill which exposes the materiality of language, hence impedes the illusion of immediate communication of emotion between a self, whose authenticity is ensured by means of such illusion, and a sympathetic other. The sentimental notion of authenticity expressed by "the real sentiments of the heart" blurs thus the distinction between substance (emotion) and its linguistic embodiment in the material sign, or language, an abstract medium which itself consists of artificial conventions.

Interestingly, in the same dialogue Rousseau has already offered a demystifying analysis of love and its "authentic" language:

Love is nothing more than an illusion. It creates itself another universe; it is surrounded with objects which have no existence but in imagination, and its language is always figurative: but its figures are neither just nor regular; its eloquence consists in its disorder; and when it reasons least, it is most convincing. (xviii)

This is a convincing, because materialistic, analysis of how love functions in the psyche and through language, which is acknowledged to be a process of figuration, and not a relationship of direct referentiality between word and feeling. More importantly, figuration, that is, metaphoric substitution or metonymic relation is presented as its sole means of verbal expression. By implication the reality, or so-called authenticity of the sentiments of the heart can be embodied by nothing but an endless chain of verbal substitution and displacement. Instead of adopting such a rational, materialistic view of Sensibility, Wollstonecraft, as a result of cultural/generic necessity ingraining the feminine traits of relationality and irrationality into her discourse, adopted one that reinstates its literary construction, claiming for it an authenticity based on essentialism. Addressing Imlay directly, she writes, "Know you of what material some hearts are made of?" (189), hence defining the nature and intensity of her emotions as a difference in sub-

33. The original source of this quotation is Leo Braudy, "The Form of the Sentimental Novel," *Novel 7* (1973): 6, 12.

stance, conveyed through the metaphor, “material hearts are made of,” which inevitably exposes the figurative nature of “the real sentiments of the heart.” She thus stylizes her utterance in accordance with the assumed “equivalence between the word and the self” in sentimental discourse (Roulston xi).

In another passage where Wollstonecraft directly addresses Imlay, she dwells on the difference of the sentimental subject through a critique of middle-class acquisitiveness. She opposes this to the pivotal values of Sensibility such as virtue and sympathy. In her thinking sympathy is not the apolitical empathy sustaining the status quo, but arises from a sense of social justice:

An ostentatious display of wealth without elegance, and a *greedy enjoyment of pleasure without sentiment*, embrutes [men entirely devoted to commerce] till they term all *virtue, of an heroic cast, romantic attempts* at something above our nature; and *anxiety about the welfare of others*, a search after misery, in which they have no concern . . . you—yourself, are strangely altered, since you have entered deeply into commerce. (191; my emphases)

This critique echoes the main conflict in Wollstonecraft’s novels between the refined Sensibility of the heroine and a hostile familial and social system which forces her into marriage without love (*Mary*) or with an insensitive, “embruted” middle-class man whose sole concern is money and property (*Maria*). With reference to *Maria*, Irmgard Maassen writes: “In a telling revision of the Richardson formula, the bourgeois woman’s virtuous sensibility is seen to clash with middle-class business habits.”<sup>34</sup> The parallel between this theme and Wollstonecraft’s critique, which she directed at Imlay in her actual letters as well, displays once more the continuity between Sensibility as genre and Sensibility as a measure of conduct that she had deeply interiorized and lived by. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, this passage involves a stylization of the discursive and non-discursive rejection, in sentimental literature, of what Tom Furniss calls the “capitalist ethos as a masculinization of society [represented by t]he Protestant work ethic, Enlightenment rationality, and the commercialization of society.”<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, the element of anti-stylization here, as in the whole of *Letters*, is to be found in Wollstonecraft’s revision of Sensibility, which involves a “move[ment] away from its conventional meaning as a ‘physical

34. Irmgard Maassen, “Mary Wollstonecraft: Romance and the Anxiety of Reading,” *Romanticism* 5.2 (1999): 4.

35. Tom Furniss, “Nasty Tricks and Tropes: Sexuality and Language in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*,” *SiR* 32 (1993): 190.

and emotional capacity for feeling' understood to be woman's 'essential characteristic' and towards a new definition that would combine the qualities of self-definition with justice."<sup>36</sup> The concepts of virtue and sympathy are radically revised in this utterance. Virtue is linked to "anxiety about the welfare of others" through conjunction, thus erasing the male-biased gender associations it involves for the female subject. By means of the modification, "of an heroic cast," virtue acquires also a sense of masculine sublime, significantly further modified by the words, "romantic attempts at something above our nature"—a comment projected onto men like Imlay ("men entirely devoted to commerce"). The Romantic transcendence these words connote merges with egalitarian concern.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of hidden polemic in *Letters* from a contemporary angle involves what I would suggest may be termed an anachronistic anti-stylization of masculine Romantic discourse. One manifestation of this is in the "revision" of the Romantic sublime. As Jeanne Moskal points out, Wollstonecraft "repeatedly describes prospects as picturesque, in which the sublime merges, in a most un-Burkean way, with the beautiful."<sup>37</sup> The conflation of the sublime and the beautiful in the phrase, "picturesquely wild," which she uses to describe a place in Norway, concisely illustrates this characteristic (131). In eighteenth-century aesthetic theory as well as in Romantic poetry "[t]he sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful, is associated with an experience of feminine nurturance, love and sensuous relaxation" (Mellor 85). Therefore, the fusion of these polar concepts embodies, I think, an anachronistic feminization of Romantic discourse before it fully emerged.

A more pervasive and culturally significant anti-stylization of Romantic discourse in *Letters* involves its infusion with a sentimental discourse, which is already revised through its incorporation of what Meena Alexander calls "a bodily knowledge" including "[t]he knowledge of maternity and nurture of the young."<sup>38</sup> We have already noted in connection with the following passage, the first sentence of which is quoted above, how expression of passion, incorporating an explicitly voiced erotic desire, is merged with the Romantic sublime:

36. Catherine N. Parke, "What Kind of Heroine Is Mary Wollstonecraft?" *Sensibility in Transformation* 104.

37. Jeanne Moskal, "The Picturesque and the Affectionate in Wollstonecraft's *Letters from Norway*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 52 (1991): 276.

38. Meena Alexander, *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley* (Savage, Maryland: Barnes and Noble, 1989) 8.

Fate has separated me from another [friend], the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs, sublime emotions absorb my soul. And, smile not, if I add, that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion, which will never more charm my senses, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child. Her sweet blushes I may yet hide in my bosom, and she is still too young to ask why starts the tear, so near akin to pleasure and pain? (100)

In the second and third sentences, Sensibility revised through overt expression of feminine desire fuses with Sensibility directed at the author's child. The Romantic sublime inscribed in the first sentence is thus dialogized and enriched through this expression of feminine tenderness and maternal love. Such dialogization of masculine Romanticism through fusion with feminine Sensibility amounts to "Wollstonecraft's creation of a female Romanticism [that] permits her to acknowledge both the ferocity of feeling and the vulnerability of the knowledge founded on it" (Alexander 57).

The anti-stylization of Sensibility in *Letters* with the aid of, and in hidden polemic with Romantic notions and tropes dialectically involves a revision and questioning of Romanticism itself. In other words, the penetration of Romantic discourse by a sentimental one dialogizes the structures of thought and language that we have come to identify with masculine Romanticism. Hence the relative masculinization of Sensibility through fusion with a tentative Romantic discourse of transcendence and empowerment involves a simultaneous feminization of Romantic discourse by means of a discourse grounded on affectivity and relationality.

Historically, Wollstonecraft was moving away from the established codes of Sensibility towards Romanticism. Retrospectively, for us, her Romanticism involves a reverse movement back to the communal and feminine values of Sensibility. The Enlightenment humanism which in *Letters* weaves together and forms the basis of this double tendency constitutes in turn a vision that is still valid and applicable to all spheres of social life, although history has since fully revealed the precariousness of the optimistic faith in rational progress and civilization.

The discursive contradictions in Wollstonecraft's writings pointed out by Conger (quoted at the beginning of this essay), and most densely and sharply exemplified in *Letters* can be summed up by Bakhtin's notion of hybridization: "hybridization . . . is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor"

(*Bakhtin Reader* 117). In *Letters*, within the space of her subjective utterances, Wollstonecraft created a highly fluid hybridization of at least three kinds of discourse which are separated from one another by epoch as well as other factors of differentiation, but which all existed and interacted in the cultural heteroglossia of her time.\*

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