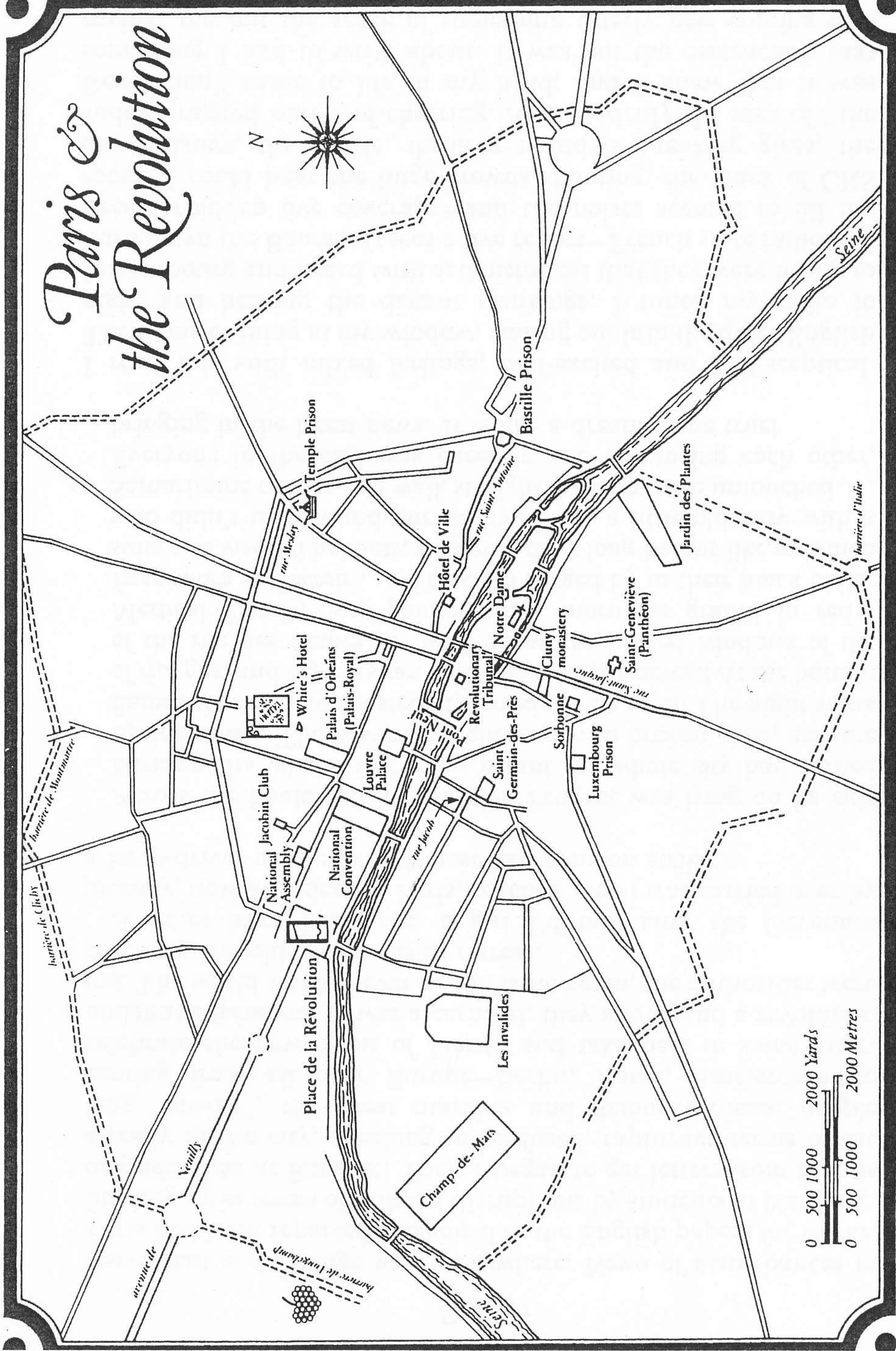
Richard Holmes. Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer. London: HarperCollins, 1996. 71-132.



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One sultry evening in the spring of 1968, standing at the window of a small upper room in Paddington, I first heard the sounds of the new French Revolution. I had not been to France for four years, and the idea of biography had lain dormant in my mind. After taking a degree at Cambridge I had come down to London and found a temporary job compiling the political register for Westminster City Council. It brought me to the hundreds of poor flats and bedsits in Victoria and Pimlico, the depressed area of South London by the Thames. I sat discussing paintwork, plumbing and social security benefits in endless sad kitchens, sipping tepid tea or sweet sherry. Powerless to act on the petty injustices and miseries I saw, I learned at least how to listen to other people, and observe some of the forces that shaped their lives. I expressed my anger in poems, written with the clumsy literalness of pop-songs, but could find no real outlet for my deeper feelings.

The five-storey house in which I had my garret was almost entirely let to other young people and students, and in keeping with the times we became a kind of commune, busy with macrobiotic food and anti-Vietnam marches and geodesic domes.

The ground-floor was occupied by the consulting rooms of a lady psychiatrist, specialising in drug-addicts and other youthful breakdowns, many of them gifted drop-outs from universities, unmarried mothers trying to find their feet, or young painters and musicians who'd temporarily blown their minds. I sketched a story-essay, which eventually became an impressionistic study of the poet Thomas Chatterton, a precursor of Romanticism, who came to London at the age of seventeen, took opium and committed suicide by mistaken overdose—or "OD", as it was succinctly called on the ground-floor. Chatterton lived at the end of the eighteenth century, but I had a strange feeling that I was writing about someone in the same house.

It was a restless time. The window of my attic room overlooked the shunting yards of Paddington station, and my dreams were shaken by the whistle and roar of departing trains. The sense of

movement and change was everywhere. News of disturbances in Paris had been reported piecemeal in the English papers for weeks, but largely in terms of isolated disruptions by students at Nanterre, or *syndicalistes* at Renault. Then I began to get letters from friends already in the city, speaking in confused, rapturous terms of the long "sit-ins", the great marches and demonstrations, people coming from all over Europe—Berlin, Rome, Amsterdam—to celebrate the new spirit of *Liberté*, and take part in some huge, undefined *événement*. It was a carnival, they wrote, and a revolution too. The world would never be the same again, the authorities were cracking, the old order was in retreat.

A letter from Françoise, a girl I'd met after the Cévennes journey, now a student in Paris, reached me; it was carried over by a lorry-driver as the French post had gone on strike:

> Across the boulevard a dark-blue Peugeot was lying on its side burning. Its wheels in the air meant the whole city had turned upside down. The pavements glittered with broken glass, and the flames shone on our posters flyleaved up the trees. The night stank of riot gas, and my eyes ran with tears—of happiness! At the bottom of the rue des Ecoles the wall below the barred windows of the Medical Faculty was painted with enormous graffiti in red—*Imagination au Pouvoir* . . . The CRS surged by in their black boiler suits and visored helmets, swinging their long batons like madmen who didn't understand our sanity. I saw a little old lady with a Samaritaine carrier-bag walk straight through them untouched . . . Everyone in the café was cheering and embracing each other, bringing in the latest news. It is like a dream come true!

I read this with mixed feelings, half-excited and half-sceptical. Then, one evening at my window, staring out into the quiet English night and hearing the distant clankings, I tuned my radio to Luxembourg and heard with astonishment that they were trying to burn down the Bourse. It was a live report—French state radio had been forbidden live coverage—and the noises seemed to fill my room. I could hear the huge crowds shouting, the crack of CRS gas-canisters, the brittle, thrilling sound of breaking glass, the sudden ragged bursts of cheering. And suddenly the idea of "the Revolution" came to life in my head, and I knew that it was something I had to write about. It was not the destruction that excited me but the sense of something utterly new coming into being, some fresh, immense possibility of political life, a new community of hope, and above all the strangely inspired note—like a

new language—that sounded in the voices of those who were witnessing it. It was a glimpse of "the dream come true", the golden age, the promised land.

Moreover, I identified it—immediately, naïvely—with that first French Revolution as seen by the English Romantics some hundred and eighty years before. The gap in time, the great and complex historical differences, for a moment meant nothing to me. For what I was feeling, what my friends were feeling, seemed to be expressed perfectly by the Romantics, and by no one else.

> 'Twas a time when Europe was rejoiced,
> France standing at the top of golden hours
> And human nature seeming born again.

So William Wordsworth had written, when in July 1790 he set off to walk through France on the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille.

There were moments when the student barricades round the Sorbonne and in parts of the Latin Quarter really did seem to be re-enacting the events of 1789–94 (though no Robespierre arrived and no Terror began). The huge open debates in the courtyard of the Sorbonne and in Paris theatres like the Odéon seemed to be emulating, if not the great ideological discussions of the first Assemblée Nationale—in many ways the climax of the entire eighteenth-century Enlightenment—at least the more fervid and impassioned meetings of the Cordeliers and the Club des Jacobins. If there was no Robespierre there were many who looked and sounded like the young, handsome, long-haired and insolent Saint-Just.

When on 27 May de Gaulle took mysterious flight from Paris to an unknown destination (actually he went by helicopter to consult with General Massu at an army base in Germany), many people drew the parallel with Louis XVI's fatal flight to Varennes of autumn 1792. If history was not exactly repeating itself then at the least it was in a strange state of theatrical *correspondence*. It was a replay, a rerun, a harmonic echo across nearly two centuries.

The whole ethos of the Sixties—that youthful explosion of idealism, colour, music, sex, hallucinogenic states, hyperbolic language and easy money ("the counter-culture", as the sociologists called it)—was based on a profoundly romantic rejection of conventional society, the old order, the establishment, the classical, the square (and also, in fact, austerity).

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven!

Many of the catchwords and concepts of the Sixties, indeed the very idea of "revolution" itself as a flamboyant act of self-assertion—"the language of personal rights"—found either inspiration or confirmation in the generation of the 1790s. Coleridge and Southey's plan to found a commune on the banks of the Susquehanna river; Blake's poetry of visions and defiance ("The Tigers of Wrath are Wiser than the Horses of Instruction", from *The Proverbs of Hell*, was one of the most popular graffiti); Shelley's notions of free love and passive resistance, understood as an early form of Flower Power, "Make Love Not War"; Coleridge's and later Thomas de Quincey's interest in drugs and dream-states; Mary Wollstonecraft's championship of the rights of women—all these spoke directly to the generation of May '68.

Above all, there was the challenge to the conventions and structures of authority, the whole tone of confrontation, which took place daily, whether in the matter of clothes, art, sexual morality, religious piety or politics. Such confrontation was international: the counter-culture took to the road and passed all frontiers, entered all cities; just as the first Romantics had set out on their wanderings to Wales, France, Germany, Italy, Greece or the Levant—only "the Orient" now meant India rather than Arabia.

What William Hazlitt wrote of the face of the young Southey before he cut his hair and settled down with his extended family in the Lake District, could have been written of many of the young bearded and Christ-like faces on the barricades of '68. These in turn unconsciously reflected the revolutionary features of the young Cuban, Che Guevara, whose image hung like an icon in a million bedsits, *aparts*, pads and communal kitchens, in London, New York, Hamburg, Paris and Rome. Hazlitt described this revolutionary and utopian archetype, as it first made its appearance in the 1790s:

> Mr Southey, as we formerly remember to have seen him, had a hectic flush upon his cheek, a roving fire in his eye, a falcon glance, a look at once aspiring and dejected. It was the look that had been impressed upon his face by the events that marked the outset of his life. It was the dawn of Liberty that still tingled his cheek . . .
>
> While he supposed it possible that a better form of society could be introduced than any other that had hitherto existed, while the light of the French Revolution beamed into his soul —while he had this hope, this faith in man left, he cherished it with a childlike simplicity, he clung to it with the fondness of a lover. He was an enthusiast, a fanatic, a leveller; he stuck at nothing that he thought would banish all pain and misery from the world; in his impatience at the smallest error or injustice, he would have sacrificed himself and the existing generation (a holocaust) to his devotion to the right cause.

Hazlitt was himself one of these young radical enthusiasts, and had visited Paris as an art student during the Peace of Amiens in 1802. In *The Spirit of the Age*, his portrait of the leading writers and politicians of his generation, written twenty years after, he continued to judge men like Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Godwin by the yardstick of their first revolutionary ideals, and in that dawn light of the French Revolution. It was a light that most of them, he felt, had gone on to deny or betray, and there is a mixed tone of cynicism and elegy—the "hectic flush" and the "falcon glance"—to many of these portraits, which the witnesses and survivors of May '68 will instantly recognise as part of their own experience. As Hazlitt wrote mockingly of Southey: "He wooed Liberty as a youthful lover, but it was perhaps more as a mistress than a bride; and he has since wedded with an elderly and not very reputable lady, called Legitimacy."

For the sense of disillusion set in quickly after May '68. This was also something about which I wanted to write. Contemporary historians now describe it in terms of the Arab oil crisis, the economic depression in Europe, the rise of right-wing governments and the advent of the first mass unemployment since the 1930s. We saw it in more immediate and human terms: communes that went broke, free unions that became bad marriages, university faculties that became hotbeds of rivalry and fruitless dispute, artistic spirits who became addicts and breakdowns, travellers who came home sick and sorry, women who became exhausted, one-parent families, a world of little presses and alternative newspapers that dropped into oblivion, and a Paris where the Bourse remained and Les Halles was destroyed.

How to make sense of all this? And how not to betray the light? As Hazlitt, once more, wrote of William Godwin, the author of *Political Justice* (1793), the most radical of all the English revolutionary tracts:

> Fatal reverse! Is truth then so variable? Is it one thing at twenty and another at forty? Is it at a burning heat in 1793, and below *zero* in 1814? . . . Were we fools then, or are we dishonest now? Or was the impulse of the mind less likely to be true and sound

when it arose from high thought at warm feeling, than afterwards, when it was warped and debased by the example, the vices, and follies of the world?

I was soon in France again myself. For a moment I saw fragments of the great *événements*, though already the carnival was in chaos and the millennial hopes in retreat, the visions of those banners against the blue spring sky, those great roaring crowds, those nightly barricades, scattered by violence and confusion and confrontations with intense personal fear.

One night, coming out of the place de la Sorbonne on to the boul' Mich, my hands full of books and papers, I was caught up in a sudden CRS sweep. It was raining lightly, a sweet-scented summer rain, and the CRS coaches—dark-green, with grilled windows, and rows of doors opening simultaneously, like a train pulling into a rush-hour station—came skidding up on to the pavements, lights flashing and klaxons blaring. A few yards away a girl in blue lycée overalls, painted with Maoist signs, was knocked to the ground and a mass of leaflets spilled out of her canvas shoulder-bag. Hesitatingly, I took a step towards her, and found myself jammed against the iron fence that runs along the site of the old Cluny monastery, where Peter Abelard used to lecture before he met Héloïse. The pressure on my chest was from the barrel of an automatic rifle.

I was looking into the face of a CRS trooper. He was slightly smaller than myself, with a dark complexion—a man from the Midi, or Corsica perhaps. He had an expression of intense boredom, and the drops of rain glittered on his visor. I felt lonely, unheroic and unrevolutionary, and never wanted to see a British policeman so much in my life. It was time for a clear, unequivocal statement of ideological loyalty.

My mouth was dry, and for a moment no sound came out. Then I heard myself saying in a thin voice: "*Je suis anglais.*" There was a pause, in which nothing much happened in the world, and then I began to add: "*J'avais peur que mademoiselle là-bas . . .*"

The visor moved impatiently, the rifle barrel dropped to my stomach, and began to prod—quite gently. "*Alors, espèce d'Anglais*" —with each word a prod—"*occupe-toi de tes affaires*"—prod—"*rentre chez toi*"—prod—and with a final roar—"*FOUS-MOI LA PAIX!*"

I crept away, but did not take his advice till much later.

I thought about this incident a good deal, however. It contained a real challenge, and it was this that made me begin to explore "the Revolution" in a different way. If I were English, why indeed didn't I mind my own business and go home? I was a foreigner, an

outsider. The Revolution was a French affair, and perhaps it had always been so. What had happened to the English in 1790? Had they too been told to go home and leave everyone in peace? And if they had stayed on, beyond the September Massacres of 1792, or beyond the execution of the King in 1793, or right on into the Terror of 1794 . . . what had happened to them? What had they made of their experiences?

I began my investigations with Wordsworth, who had written so well in *The Prelude* about the intoxicating atmosphere of the times. He was an undergraduate at St John's College, Cambridge, when he made that first summer visit to France, walking three hundred miles in two weeks through Artois and Burgundy, with his friend Robert Jones. Though they did not visit Paris the excitement of the Revolution was evident in every country town and village through which they passed. At Calais, the celebrations of Bastille Day, "the great federal day", were still in progress, and the entire population had taken to the streets in rejoicing. Going southwards through Arras (Robespierre's birthplace) and Troyes, towards Chalon-sur-Saône, they found each hamlet "gaudy with reliques of that festival, flowers left to wither on triumphal arcs, and window-garlands". The French were open and welcoming, full of hope and enthusiasm for the future, with "benevolence and blessedness spread like a fragrance everywhere, when spring has left no corner of the land untouched".

On the public boat from Chalon to Lyons they met delegates from Paris eager to talk with them, and Fédéré soldiers with muskets draped with flowers, some flourishing their swords "as if to fight the saucy air". Stopping off by the banks of the Rhône in the evenings, they were invited to open-air banquets provided free by the Communes. They drank at long wooden tables under the summer stars of the Midi and danced with the peasant-girls, radiant with ribbons fluttering in their hair and tricolour scarves tied tightly round their waists. It was an experience of the early, fraternal days of the Revolution that Wordsworth never forgot, politics and romance perfectly entwined, as they danced hand in hand, "at signal given", round and round the little dusty squares. "All hearts were open, every tongue was loud with amity and glee; we bore a name honoured in France, the name of Englishmen."

The following year Wordsworth abandoned his studies in Hebrew and Oriental languages (intended to qualify him for a post as a clergyman) and went directly to Paris. He arrived in December 1791, armed with a letter of introduction to Helen Maria Williams, poetess and francophile, to whom his first published poem had been dedicated in rapturous terms. He attended the debates in the

National Assembly at the Louvre Palace, and in the noisy Jacobin Club nearby: "In both her clamorous Halls, the National Synod and Jacobins, I saw the Revolutionary power toss like a ship at anchor, rocked by storms."

He quartered the city from one end to the other in a series of long hiking expeditions, as if he were still in his native Cumberland. From west to east, from the Champ-de-Mars to the boulevard Saint-Antoine (where Dickens later placed Madame Defarge's wine-shop); and from north to south, descending the slopes of Montmartre, still covered with vines, crossing over the Seine and the Île de la Cité, to climb again up the long rue Saint-Jacques to the "dome of Geneviève" on the hill where the Pantheon now stands. He patrolled the arcades of the Palais-Royal (then the Palais d'Orléans) fascinated by the mercurial crowds: soldiers, hawkers, ballad-mongers, prostitutes, soapbox "haranguers"—including a feminist club—and local demagogues, "a hubbub wild!" He noted the mixture of respectable bookshops, taverns, brothels and gaming houses (Balzac describes them, still there a generation later, in *La Peau de Chagrin*), and was struck by the way that political talk had become common currency in the streets, so that everywhere he was surrounded by "hissing Factionists with ardent eyes, in knots, or pairs, or single ant-like swarms of builders and subverters, every face that hope or apprehension could put on . . ."

He went to the ruined site of the Bastille prison, at the north-east corner of the city wall. Until the coming of the Terror, this remained the joyful symbol of the Revolution, the *ancien régime* torn apart brick by brick; then it was replaced by the symbol of the guillotine, set up on the place de la Révolution (now Concorde). Bastille keys were carried across Europe as the insignia of liberation; Chateaubriand even took one to the Governor of Newfoundland, while another reached Jefferson's house in Virginia. Tourists and sympathisers like Wordsworth eagerly picked up pieces of stone from the prison rubble to bequeath to their children. Wordsworth described emotionally how he watched the west wind, the zephyr (later to be Shelley's "destroyer and preserver"), whipping through the debris and "sporting with the dust" of the ruins. He sat "in the open sun and pocketed a relic, in the guise of an enthusiast".

But this phrase brought me up short. Why only "in the guise" of an enthusiast? Was this a kind of political retraction—he was writing ten years after the events he describes? Or was it that same odd sense of alienation, the feeling that it was somehow "not his business" either, that revolution was something for the French alone?

His responses were complicated: he was looking for "something I

could not find"; for an uplifting wave of revolutionary joy which did not quite touch him; in "honest truth" he was "affecting more emotion" than he felt. His reflections on this "strange indifference", in *The Prelude*, brought him suddenly close to me, and made me want to enter more deeply into the personal reactions of those few and scattered English witnesses. I wanted to know more about their hesitations and their innermost thoughts. What I needed, once again, was their biography. I pressed more closely on Wordsworth's poem, but without realising it I was beginning to ask questions that such a literary and public text could not answer.

Wordsworth said that in going to witness the Revolution he had passed too abruptly "into a theatre, of which the stage was busy with an action far advanced". Though he had prepared himself by reading "the master pamphlets of the day" and endless discussions with his friends, his understanding was too intellectual, too rational perhaps. Real events lacked a "living form and body" in his mind; they had not fully entered his imagination. "All things were to me loose and disjointed, and the affections left without a vital interest." His heart was "all given to the people, and my love was theirs"; yet it was precisely from these ordinary people—*les citoyens*—that he was most cut off. He had no friends in Paris, and he could not experience directly how the Revolution had shaken and transformed their lives. He was the outsider, the observer. He describes this in a passage that uses no revolutionary symbols at all, but reverts instead to the familiar imagery of his childhood in the Lakes—to the images of plants and weather, presenting the French Revolution in terms, of all things, of an English greenhouse:

> . . . I scarcely felt
> The shock of these concussions, unconcerned,
> Tranquil almost, and careless as a flower
> Glassed in a green house, or a parlour shrub
> When every bush and tree, the country through,
> Is shaking to the roots . . .

It was almost as if the great revolutionary wind, the shaking of the foundations, had still not touched anything deep or permanent within him.

What changed Wordsworth happened not in Paris that winter, but in Orléans and Blois, where he went to study French throughout the spring and summer of 1792. It was here that his affair with Annette Vallon, his teacher, took place, which resulted in a child born in December 1792; and here that his great friendship with

Capitaine Michel Beaupuy, a cavalry officer and passionate sympathiser with the revolutionary cause, was formed.

Wordsworth tells the story, partially in disguised form, in Books IX and X of *The Prelude*; and later added that Beaupuy had more influence on his thinking than any other man except Coleridge. He describes how in his conversations with Beaupuy a "hatred of absolute rule" daily laid a stronger and stronger hold upon his feelings, "mixed with pity too, and love" for the poor and abject people of France.

One day, as he was walking with Beaupuy in the country lanes near the Loire, there occurred one of those quintessentially Wordsworthian incidents—a meeting with one of the lonely outcasts of society, like the Cumberland beggar of later years—which seemed to crystallise everything that he had believed intellectually, and give it decisive human shape and conviction. It was for Wordsworth a form of conversion-experience, in which revolutionary theory was suddenly flooded by a personal truth.

The meeting was simplicity itself. A poor farm-girl, thin, weary and "hunger-bitten", was leading a heifer along the lane by a cord. The heifer nibbled hungrily at the wild berries in the hedgerows, and the girl, too exhausted and depressed to lead it on, "crept" by its side distractedly knitting, "in a heartless mood of solitude". Neither man spoke, but when they had passed by Beaupuy broke out in extreme agitation and anger: "'Tis against *that* which we are fighting'" and Wordsworth instantly felt that "a spirit was abroad" in France which would destroy such poverty for ever, and

> . . . Should see the people having a strong hand
> In making their own laws; whence better days
> To all mankind.

At the end of October, "inflamed with hope", Wordsworth was back in Paris to see this spirit at work. But what he found appalled and shook him: the King was imprisoned, the September Massacres had taken place, the guillotine had been set up in the place de la Révolution, and Robespierre was in the process of seizing dictatorial power in the National Convention. It was one of the great spiritual crises of Wordsworth's life: where did his true loyalties now lie? Should he stay in France, ally himself to the Girondist cause, throw in his lot with the other English and Americans in Paris—Tom Paine, Helen Maria Williams, the Barlows, the Christies? Above all, should he remain with Annette to give her what protection he could, and to make their love-child legitimate? Or

should he flee back to England and safety, because in the end none of all this was "his business"; because he was an English poet who had had an adventure, who had gathered his "copy", and who owed it to his family—and his poetry—to scramble back home and begin to write about what he had seen and experienced? I was gripped by his dilemma. I entered into it, suspending history, seeing obscurely so many of the problems of my own generation expressed in a new and vivid way; seeing the vague excitements and cloudy enthusiasms focused down to an intense burning point of a single life: seeing, in fact, the biographical process become an instrument of moral precision and analysis—a way of making sense of my own world. And, of course, I passionately wanted Wordsworth to stay.

Well, he did stay: for approximately five weeks, in the tiny fifth-floor garret room—*une chambre de bonne*—of an unknown hotel on the Left Bank, ranging "more eagerly" through the city than he had done before, walking beneath the high walls of the Temple prison where the King and his family were incarcerated and crossing the pont du Carrousel to stand in the grim, deserted square in front of the Louvre—"a black and empty area then"—where the Swiss Guards had opened fire on the mob as it stormed the Louvre Palace. The scarred trees and the stained gravel bore witness to the struggle, and his mind dwelt on the heaps of dead and dying.

He went again to the arcades of the Palais-Royal, tasting its new atmosphere of rumour and political fear: a hawker thrust into his hand a copy of the pamphlet entitled "Denunciations of the Crimes of Maximilien Robespierre"—the text of Louvet's famous attack on Robespierre in the Convention, which failed to rally support, and ultimately sealed the fate of the Girondists the following summer. Wordsworth began to see with his "proper eyes" how the great questions of Liberty, Life and Death would be settled—not, as he had imagined, by some great common impulse of the people, some invincible natural force like a storm sweeping all before it, "the spirit of the age"; but rather by the personal struggles and "arbitrement" of those who ruled in the capital city. In the crucible of power the conflict of individual men would be decisive. His idealism was chastened; yet his response was the reverse of cynical. He says that he almost prayed that the Revolution would now draw in only the men worthy of Liberty, "matured to live in plainness and in truth", and that men like this might arrive, with the gift of tongues,

> . . . From the four quarters of the winds to do
> For France, what without help she could not do,
> A work of honour . . .

I remembered our talk of friends flying in to Paris in May from all the capitals of Europe.

It was clear that Wordsworth realised the Revolution had reached a critical stage. But what did he think of his own situation within it? It was here that I came up against the biographer's dependence on the survival of personal papers. No letters or journals of Wordsworth are known for this period, and the touching letters of Annette Vallon, discovered over a hundred years later in the municipal archives (they were detained by the French political censor), threw no light on Wordsworth's time in Paris. I had to make what I could of the 1805 text of *The Prelude*.

Up to a point, it is remarkably frank and revealing. He describes the nights he used to lie awake in his little hotel room, reading with "unextinguished taper", and how—thinking of the violence of the mob, a violence like nothing he had ever remotely experienced in his life before—"the fear gone by pressed on me almost like a fear to come."

> I thought of those September massacres,
> Divided from me by a little month,
> And felt and touched them, a substantial dread . . .

He could not sleep, and his imagination "wrought upon" him until he felt he could hear a voice crying through the whole city, "Sleep no more." He tried to calm himself with rational thoughts in the long hours before the winter dawn, but he could not recover his sense of "full security", and gradually a deep and almost nightmarish terror of Paris possessed him:

> . . . At the best it seemed a place of fear
> Unfit for the repose of night
> Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

Finally, in the third week of December 1792, Wordsworth took the diligence to Calais and "reluctantly" returned to England. In *The Prelude* he says the decisive reason was "absolute want of funds for my support"—and also, one may suppose, for the support of Annette, whose baby had just been born. Fear for his personal safety was not the conscious motive, for he says in a crucial passage that he had considered sacrificing himself to the revolutionary Girondist cause, though "no better than an alien in the land". What he says is convincing—there is every evidence that the young Wordsworth was a brave and adventurous man. Moreover, it

shows how deeply he had pledged himself to the Revolution as he understood it, even though he saw realistically that his contribution "must be of small worth". Had he had means, had he been free, he says,

> I doubtless should have made a common cause
> With some who perished; haply perished, too,
> A poor mistaken and bewildered offering—
> Should to the breast of Nature have gone back,
> With all my resolutions, all my hopes,
> A Poet only to myself, to men
> Useless . . .

Of course, it is in retrospect—after some ten years—that he regards such a sacrifice as "useless" and "mistaken". At the time it must have been an agonising decision to take, and there is no doubt that in making the sensible choice to go home he felt he had betrayed some ideal deep within himself—had in fact abandoned most of what both Beaupuy and Annette represented: his youthful hopes of life, his revolutionary spirit. In the long term, and from the literary point of view, he was right, and justified: he was destined to be a great poet, not a political martyr. But the months of depression and uncertainty he suffered after this at Racedown with Dorothy, before being reanimated by his meeting with Coleridge (the "Friend" to whom all this part of *The Prelude* is addressed), show what the decision cost him.

In one of the most moving passages of Book X, speaking directly to Coleridge the bare truth "as if to thee alone in private talk", he says that "through months, through years" he was haunted by what he had left behind in France. His daytime thoughts were melancholic, his dreams miserable. Even long after the atrocities of the Terror were over he scarcely had "one night of quiet sleep", and he was filled with visions of despair. Most striking of all, he dreamed continually of being back in Paris and being hauled before one of the revolutionary courts, accused of some nameless act of treachery. Hopelessly and desperately he would try to defend himself by

> . . . Long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust tribunals,—with a voice
> Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
> Of treachery and desertion in the place
> The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.

Nothing could be more frank, no confession more heartfelt, than this admission of the revolutionary who—for the best of reasons, perhaps—had in 1792 abandoned the cause.

Here my own investigations were also brought up short again. Wordsworth had left Paris in December 1792, along with so many others who saw the radical direction in which Robespierre was directing the Revolution. Were any writers bold enough to remain? The history of the so-called White's Hotel group of expatriates had never been written, though the individual stories—of largely political figures like Tom Paine, who was elected Deputy for the Pas de Calais, fell foul of Robespierre in 1793 and missed the guillotine only by the mistaken marking of his cell door—were comparatively well known. There were also minor celebrities like Helen Maria Williams, who survived the Revolution, and several weeks of imprisonment with her mother and sister in the Luxembourg, to write such highly coloured accounts as her *Memories of the Reign of Robespierre* (1795). The description of her midnight arrest, by the head of her local Paris *section*, a mixture of curious gallantry and ruthless revolutionary police work, is one of the few memorable and convincing passages; though there is also a fine black-comic episode in which she explains the enormous value of her English tea-kettle in keeping up the morale of those in the condemned cells.

But none of these memoirs provided the day-to-day authenticity, the biographical intensity, the quality of first-hand witness to a decisive experience which I wanted to supply some mirror to the events of 1968. Moreover, I had already glimpsed, through Wordsworth, the shadow of a philosophical problem—though was it philosophical or psychological?—which seemed to lie behind the English experience of revolution. It was not so much the alienation of the English witness from the events he observed, though this was obviously important; more the enormous gap that was revealed between his *rational* expectations of the Revolution, the whole atmosphere of progressive eighteenth-century Enlightenment—and its *imaginative* impact upon him as an individual, a wild mixture of hope and terror and desperation, the sense of life being radically altered in a way that broke every form and convention that had been previously held. It was also the sense of personal demands made, of a sudden need for sacrifice and risk—Wordsworth's choice to go or stay—which might never be encountered in ordinary life in such an absolute form. I wanted to discover someone who had met all this head-on; and I wanted to know in detail how they had, quite simply, made out.

2

The gap between rational expectation and imaginative impact or, to put it in its classical form, between Reason and Imagination, was something that became progressively more significant as the heady excitements of 1968 drained away into the anxious and cynical 1970s. "Imagination" had been one of the watchwords of the Paris students, conjuring up a whole new world of brilliant, creative, unauthoritarian (another key notion) solutions to society's problems. But what did it mean? It was of course taken from nineteenth-century Romantic vocabulary—it assumed the rebellious idealism and individualism of Blake and Baudelaire, Shelley and Bakunin, Trotsky and Lautréamont. But still, what did it actually *mean*?

In the famous poster stuck to the bolted door of the Sorbonne on the night of 13 May 1968—like Luther's declaration on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral—it was used in a curious way. Posters are not intended to be philosophical statements, but this one indicated a particular way of thinking. It read: "The revolution which is beginning will call into question not only capitalist society but industrial society. The consumer society must perish of a violent death. The society of alienation must disappear from history. We are inventing a new and original world—*Imagination au Pouvoir!*"

"Imagination" is an instrument both of creation and of destruction. It is a way of wiping the slate clean, of achieving a gleaming tabula rasa. The attempt to oppose it to existing society in all its corrupt forms—capitalist, industrial, consumer, and alienated—evokes not so much Marx as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "Imagination" is a way of purifying society from all corruption or organisation; a way of starting again from the individual goodness of man, unfettered by prejudice or convention. Indeed, it slowly dawned on me, "Imagination" is here used in the opposite sense to what one might expect: it means precisely the "Pure Reason"—the "Godlike Reason"—the "Progressive Reason"—of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Like the early idealist revolutionaries of the 1790s,

I remembered our talk of friends flying in to Paris in May from all the capitals of Europe.

It was clear that Wordsworth realised the Revolution had reached a critical stage. But what did he think of his own situation within it? It was here that I came up against the biographer's dependence on the survival of personal papers. No letters or journals of Wordsworth are known for this period, and the touching letters of Annette Vallon, discovered over a hundred years later in the municipal archives (they were detained by the French political censor), threw no light on Wordsworth's time in Paris. I had to make what I could of the 1805 text of *The Prelude*.

Up to a point, it is remarkably frank and revealing. He describes the nights he used to lie awake in his little hotel room, reading with "unextinguished taper", and how—thinking of the violence of the mob, a violence like nothing he had ever remotely experienced in his life before—"the fear gone by pressed on me almost like a fear to come."

> I thought of those September massacres,
> Divided from me by a little month,
> And felt and touched them, a substantial dread . . .

He could not sleep, and his imagination "wrought upon" him until he felt he could hear a voice crying through the whole city, "Sleep no more." He tried to calm himself with rational thoughts in the long hours before the winter dawn, but he could not recover his sense of "full security", and gradually a deep and almost nightmarish terror of Paris possessed him:

> . . . At the best it seemed a place of fear
> Unfit for the repose of night
> Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

Finally, in the third week of December 1792, Wordsworth took the diligence to Calais and "reluctantly" returned to England. In *The Prelude* he says the decisive reason was "absolute want of funds for my support"—and also, one may suppose, for the support of Annette, whose baby had just been born. Fear for his personal safety was not the conscious motive, for he says in a crucial passage that he had considered sacrificing himself to the revolutionary Girondist cause, though "no better than an alien in the land". What he says is convincing—there is every evidence that the young Wordsworth was a brave and adventurous man. Moreover, it

shows how deeply he had pledged himself to the Revolution as he understood it, even though he saw realistically that his contribution "must be of small worth". Had he had means, had he been free, he says,

> I doubtless should have made a common cause
> With some who perished; haply perished, too,
> A poor mistaken and bewildered offering—
> Should to the breast of Nature have gone back,
> With all my resolutions, all my hopes,
> A Poet only to myself, to men
> Useless . . .

Of course, it is in retrospect—after some ten years—that he regards such a sacrifice as "useless" and "mistaken". At the time it must have been an agonising decision to take, and there is no doubt that in making the sensible choice to go home he felt he had betrayed some ideal deep within himself—had in fact abandoned most of what both Beaupuy and Annette represented: his youthful hopes of life, his revolutionary spirit. In the long term, and from the literary point of view, he was right, and justified: he was destined to be a great poet, not a political martyr. But the months of depression and uncertainty he suffered after this at Racedown with Dorothy, before being reanimated by his meeting with Coleridge (the "Friend" to whom all this part of *The Prelude* is addressed), show what the decision cost him.

In one of the most moving passages of Book X, speaking directly to Coleridge the bare truth "as if to thee alone in private talk", he says that "through months, through years" he was haunted by what he had left behind in France. His daytime thoughts were melancholic, his dreams miserable. Even long after the atrocities of the Terror were over he scarcely had "one night of quiet sleep", and he was filled with visions of despair. Most striking of all, he dreamed continually of being back in Paris and being hauled before one of the revolutionary courts, accused of some nameless act of treachery. Hopelessly and desperately he would try to defend himself by

> . . . Long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust tribunals,—with a voice
> Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
> Of treachery and desertion in the place
> The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.

the students had been intoxicated by supremely rational expectations. They had wanted to change a whole world—or re-invent it—without having the faintest notion of the impact this would have. They had been led on, not as they thought by their warm hearts (and they *were* warm), but by the wonderful ice-palaces in their heads. They hadn't imagined anything in the *constructive* sense at all. They were utopian speculators whose Brave New World lay in their minds alone, a bundle of slogans, images, dream-words and seed-ideas.

That, at any rate, seemed one way of looking at it; and of accounting for the lack of political consequences to 1968, which began to make my comparison with the earlier Revolution seem superficial. One of the most influential. French commentators, Edgar Morin, writing in *Le Monde* at the end of May of that year, already drew the distinction along similar lines: between a political and a cultural revolution, in which "Imagination" had played a role more educative than socially revolutionary. He wrote:

> Marx once said that the French Revolution was a classic revolution because it developed the characteristics upon which all succeeding bourgeois revolutions were modelled. Perhaps, in a similar way, the Paris Student Commune will become the classic model for all future transformations in Western societies. The destruction of the University Bastille drew together all types of young people in much the same way as the destruction of that other Bastille united the Three Orders in 1789. The transformation of the Sorbonne into a forum-cum-festival-cum-laboratory of ideas created the image of an open society and an open university where imagination reigns in the place of a dismal bureaucracy; where education is available to all; and where economic exploitation and domination have been eradicated . . . Precisely *because* it has been utopian rather than constructive it has been able to envisage a future that embraces the whole of society.

Pondering on these various interpretations, I continued to search among the scant records of the White's Hotel group. I located the actual site of the hotel, strategically placed in the passage des Petits-Pères, between the King's prison in the Temple and the arcades of the Palais-Royal. It is a tiny side-street, next to the old church of Notre Dame des Victoires which was pillaged in 1794 and which became the official Bourse des Valeurs between 1796 and 1809. The present hotel building is largely occupied by the

local Commissariat de Police, who knew nothing of its historic associations; which was perhaps just as well.

The existence of the White's Hotel group became best known in England in 1792, when the *Annual Register* carried a report of the notorious banquet held there by the Friends of the Rights of Man, on 18 November—just after Wordsworth had gone back to Paris. The banquet was attended by some fifty ardent francophiles—English, Irish and American—among whom were Tom Paine, who was currently being burnt in effigy in England; and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, who was to be executed for treason after the rising of the United Irishmen in 1804.

Forty "treasonous toasts", as the *Register* reported, were drunk—to the National Convention, to the French armies, and to the "speedy abolition of all hereditary titles and feudal distinctions"—and a revolutionary verse by Helen Maria Williams was recited. A wealthy banker, Sir Robert Smythe, formally renounced his title, to prolonged applause. An American poet, Joel Barlow, presented a "Letter to the National Convention in France" which earned him, along with Thomas Christie and John Horne Tooke, the title of "Citoyen". Barlow's works had been printed in London by Joseph Johnson, a radical publisher of St Paul's Churchyard, who was also to print the early work of Wordsworth and Blake. Yet within three months this whole ebullient group was to be scattered, and my researches led mournfully to a history of arrests, trials, recantations or executions: either at the hands of Pitt's Government in England for treason (especially during the great Treason Trials of 1794), or at the hands of Robespierre's Committee of Public Safety for being aliens and spies.

For the White's Hotel group were caught between the two fires of revolution and reaction. Among their most tragic stories was that of the Rev William Jackson, who was arrested on a mission between Paris and Dublin, and tried for High Treason in November 1794. While waiting for the capital sentence to be passed, his wife brought him a strong brew of tea in the cells below the dock. On his own instructions it had been heavily laced with whisky—and "metallic poisoning"—and in a few minutes he was convulsed in agony. The court, outraged at this gesture of revolutionary suicide, demanded that Jackson be dragged back up to the dock to hear his sentence. But one of the jury, an apothecary, mercifully intervened: "I think him verging to eternity; he has every symptom of death upon him . . . I do not think he can hear his judgement." So the enthusiast of Liberty died in the cells in his wife's arms, leaving no record of his life but a bare court transcript.

From White's Hotel in Paris I myself moved back to Joseph Johnson's publishing house in London, determined to pursue my enquiries from the other direction, among the circle of radical writers in London who sympathised with events in France. I searched among the names of those who had dined at Johnson's table—Blake, William Godwin, Joel and Ruth Barlow—and then, many months later, I came across a letter written to one of Johnson's little-known friends, William Roscoe, a liberal attorney, in Liverpool. This letter is still kept in the Central Library at Liverpool, among a mass of minor papers. But to me it was one of the most exciting documents I had ever read. It was dated London, 12 November 1792—exactly six days before the banquet at White's—and contained the following paragraph:

> I have determined to set out for Paris in the course of a fortnight or three weeks; and I shall not now halt at Dover, I promise you; for I go alone—neck or nothing is the word. During my stay I shall not forget my friends; but I will tell you so when I am really there. Meantime let me beg you not to mix with the shallow herd who throw an odium on immutable principles, because some of the mere instruments of the Revolution were too sharp.—Children of any growth will do mischief when they meddle with edged tools.

The voice broke in on me like a new sound, a new dimension: brisk, cheerful, daring, strangely modern. Paris, alone, neck or nothing! It was like that moment in a Shakespearian play when, after the muffled scene-setting dialogue of the minor characters, the hero abruptly enters from an unexpected angle in the wings, speaking with the sudden clarity and assurance that a major actor brings to his part. The whole theatre instinctively stiffens to attention. Yet in this case it was not a hero but a heroine. For the author of the letter to Roscoe was Mary Wollstonecraft. It was she who was setting out for Paris, quite alone, and airily referring to the September Massacres as "meddling with edged tools". I had found my exemplar, and my guide.

3

In November 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft was thirty-three years old, unmarried, and that rarest of things in eighteenth-century England, a woman freelance reviewer and writer, living entirely by her own pen. She had published, as well as a mass of occasional

journalism, four books: a critique of teaching methods, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786); a semi-autobiographical novel, *Mary* (1788); a collection of tales for children, *Original Stories* (1788); and a classic first statement of British feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792). This last work, attacking male attitudes to education, marriage and the Rousseauistic "romanticising" of women's subservient role in conventional society, was dedicated to the French statesman Talleyrand. The dedication closed with a characteristically cool but insistent demand that the revolutionaries should turn their legislative attention to the claims of women everywhere: "I wish, sir, to set some investigations of this kind afloat in France; and should they lead to a confirmation of my principles when your Constitution is revised, the Rights of Women may be respected, if it be fully proved that reason calls for this respect, and loudly demands JUSTICE for one-half of the human race."

Characteristic, too, that her claims were based on "Reason"—not on "Imagination", a word she was still inclined to associate with what was fanciful and frivolous.

All Mary Wollstonecraft's works had been published by Joseph Johnson, and he was the linchpin of her professional career. She had led a penurious early life as a schoolteacher at Newington Green, in North London, and as governess to the aristocratic Kingsborough family in Ireland (a job she detested) before he encouraged her to return and settle in the capital in 1787. He took lodgings for her in Blackfriars, and she began to mix with his circle of radical intellectuals and religious nonconformists. While working on her books she supported herself by translating and writing essays and reviews on the books and topics of the day for Johnson's newly founded magazine, the *Analytical Review*. Johnson found in her a person of exceptional intelligence and forceful views, who could write with great speed and fluency—though not always elegantly—and argue in mixed company without reserve or embarrassment.

A harsh and unhappy childhood, dominated by an unstable and drunken father whom she never respected, had given Mary Wollstonecraft an unusual sense of her own independence and reliance in her own judgment; and a corresponding lack of respect for all kinds of male authority that she did not feel had been genuinely earned, whether in life or in literature. At the same time this passionate, ebullient and frequently opinionated woman was given to terrible swings of mood, from hectic noisy enthusiasm to almost suicidal depression and a sense of futility and loneliness.

It was typical of her that after a violent disagreement with Johnson one evening she should flash round a note of hand the next morning which said simply:

> You made me very low-spirited last night, by your manner of talking.—You are my only friend—the only person I am intimate with.—I never had a father, or a brother—you have been both to me, ever since I knew you—yet I have sometimes been very petulant.—I have been thinking of those instances of ill-humour and quickness, and they appeared like crimes.
>
> Yours sincerely, Mary.

It was this spontaneous warmth of heart and feeling, this direct touch upon the chords of life, that seems to have captivated almost everyone, man or woman, who got to know her well. Although among those who only knew her public persona as a feminist author, she frequently excited scorn and even hatred. Horace Walpole, the friend of the poet Gray, and the kindly eccentric of Strawberry Hill, called her a "hyena in petticoats". The philosopher William Godwin, a man of almost studied calm and self-control, came home in a fever of irritation from a dinner at Johnson's in 1791 where he had hoped to be introduced to Tom Paine. The fourth member of the dinner-party had not allowed him to get a word in edgeways with the author of *The Rights of Man* before he decamped to France. The vexatious person who had dominated the conversation was the author of *The Rights of Woman*. She was also to be, six years later, Godwin's wife. He called her a "sort of female Werther"—after Goethe's popular novel of the new, "emotional" sensibility.

Certainly the fact that she was still unmarried in her early thirties excited considerable speculation. She was a large, handsome woman with a striking pair of brown eyes, an unruly mass of chestnut hair and long expressive hands—not the trim, dowdy blue-stocking of eighteenth-century convention. She had noticeable dress sense, and each of the half-dozen different portraits I found of her in the 1790s showed a different fashion of clothes and a completely different hairstyle.

The portrait of late 1791, especially commissioned by her friend Roscoe to celebrate the publication of her *Rights of Woman*, showed her in her Amazonian phase: lean-featured, with the severe dark dress and high white stock of the nonconformist intellectual, her carefully curled and powdered hair brushed back from her brow and shoulders. She looks like a formidable young headmistress. Yet some two years later an engraving shows her as a thoroughly

romantic *femme de trente*, wearing the loose white gown of the progressive woman, with high waist and low décolletage, her chestnut hair falling in a mass of wild tresses over her forehead and shoulders, uncombed and unpowdered, and her head crowned with a sort of half-stovepipe riding hat, a racy Parisian affair, with a velvet band and curved brim.

These outward changes of style give some clue to her mercurial and passionate temperament, and certainly belie any suggestion of mannish coldness or lesbian hauteur. In fact, in 1792, gossip not surprisingly gave her a romantic connection with her publisher, which she laughingly denied in her letters to Roscoe, while trailing her petticoat in a most unhyena-like manner: "Our friend Johnson is well—I am told the world, to talk big, married me to him while we were away; but you know that I am still a spinster on the wing. At Paris, indeed, I might take a husband for the time being, and get divorced when my truant heart longed again to nestle with its old friends; but this speculation has not yet entered into my plan."

This talk of a husband was actually bravado, or at least putting a brave face on matters. For the truth was that Mary Wollstonecraft had passed the summer of 1792 in the agonies of an unrequited love affair with another of Johnson's friends, the gifted and highly unstable painter Henri Fuseli. Mary had insisted that her passion was platonic, or anyway based on a marriage of true minds. But Fuseli's wife had not been of the same opinion, especially when Mary suggested a trip to Paris with Fuseli and Johnson; and, when this fell through, planned a ménage à trois with Fuseli in London. That September a domestic row ensued, and Fuseli's door was for ever closed to Mary—the abrupt but inevitable termination of what she had described, curiously, as "a rational desire". This story—largely based on the hearsay of friends, for Mary's letters to Fuseli were destroyed—gave me a further clue to Mary's character: headstrong, entirely impatient with conventions (though the ménage à trois was, a generation later, to be a typical Romantic solution to the "problem" of marriage), and yet with an odd kind of sexual innocence. For there can be no doubt, from later events, that Mary Wollstonecraft was still a virgin at this time.

She had, moreover, fallen for a perhaps unexpected kind of man. Fuseli was brilliantly imaginative to the point of neurosis, philandering, foreign (he was Swiss by birth) and extremely demanding. Many of these qualities are summed up in his most famous painting, the disturbing and sexually symbolic picture *The Nightmare*—with its abandoned female sleeper flung back across a bed, while a hideous incubus crouches on her breast. That this man should have

been Mary's type made me think that any simple interpretation of her emotional character—a frustrated spinster intellectual (as she jokingly implied) or a hungry, dominating, even man-hating woman—would be rather short of the mark.

Moreover, Mary had not led an emotionally sheltered life, hidden away in books or schools. As a child she had protected her mother physically from the assaults of her drunken father; and when her mother was dying in 1782 it was Mary—aged twenty-three—who came home to nurse her. When her younger sister Eliza lapsed into depression after the birth of her first child, it was Mary who spirited her away in a carriage and insisted on a separation from her bullying husband. It was Mary, too, who set up the school in Newington Green where her other sister, Evarina, taught; and where her greatest friend, Fanny Blood, found independence. Most indicative of all, when Fanny Blood married and went away with her husband to Portugal, it was Mary who answered the call to attend her in childbirth, in November 1785, sailing to Lisbon alone to do so. Mary's feelings for Fanny were the most important thing in her early life, and showed both her loyalty to those she loved and her powerful organising and maternal instinct, at its best in a crisis.

When Fanny, too, died in her arms after giving birth, Mary's profound sense of vocation to speak for the plight of women crystallised. Two years later she was beginning to write for Johnson, and with her intensive reading and her eager pursuit of the intellectual debate aroused by the Revolution in France—most especially by the work of Tom Paine and Condorcet—the intense awareness of women's *plight* leapt forward into the powerful and socially revolutionary concept of women's *right*.

A journey to Paris was, on the face of it, not such a mad adventure for a woman who had already travelled to Dublin and to Lisbon. Besides, Mary Wollstonecraft, whatever her private uncertainties, was now a writer with a growing public reputation both in England and France. She had met Talleyrand in London—he remarked on her insouciant manner of serving tea out of unmatched cups and saucers. Her book had been widely reviewed, and attacked, in the English press; and a translation of it had rapidly appeared in Paris, under the title *Une Défense des Droits des Femmes*. There it had attracted the attention of the Girondists, the moderate party opposed to Robespierre's Jacobins. They already had close contacts with Johnson through White's Hotel and specifically through Citoyen and Député Tom Paine. The Girondists' group were particularly interested in social and educational reform,

and the *Rights of Woman* was a *carte de visite* to Madame Roland's salon and those leading deputies who met there, like Brissot, Condorcet, Pétion and Vergniaud. It also gave Mary great standing among the more eccentric and active feminist campaigners, like the flamboyant Olympe de Gouges (originally an actress called Marie Gouze) and the glamorous Madame Stéphanie de Genlis, author of several polemical works on women's rights, who always wore a polished piece of Bastille stone on a gold chain in her plunging cleavage, to the confusion of her male colleagues—an early case of radical chic.

Yet Mary Wollstonecraft's decision to go alone to Paris was a brave one. On the eve of her departure in mid-December she wrote frankly to her sister Evarina that she was struggling with "vapourish fears". She was alarmed by the increasingly hostile attitude to the Revolution that was becoming apparent even in liberal circles in London, ever since the arrest of the King. Had she not already booked and paid for her place in the Dover mail she says she would "have put off the journey again on account of the present posture of affairs at home". In his *Memoir* of her, Godwin later said that she would not have gone at all had it not been for her anxiety to forget Fuseli, and there may be much truth in this. However, her practical arrangements show that the expedition was well thought out, and only intended to last about six weeks. She had kept on the small apartment she now rented at Store Street behind the British Museum (on the present site of the University gardens east of Bedford Square) and left her cat with a neighbour. She had arranged to draw money through Johnson's publishing contacts in Paris, and accepted a commission from him to write a series of "Letters from the Revolution", with a Paris dateline in the best tradition of the foreign correspondent.

Like Wordsworth, she appears to have had notes of introduction to Helen Williams, and probably also to Madame Roland. She had wisely arranged to stay with private friends in the rue Meslay in the third arrondissement—a quiet street in the north-east corner of the city, off the boulevard Saint-Martin and near the present place de la République. The large house at No 22 was owned by a well-to-do French merchant, Monsieur Fillietaz, who had married Aline Bregantz—one of Mary's friends from her teaching days. So familiar faces, as she supposed, awaited her in Paris. What she did not realise was that the Fillietaz family had left for the country, and that the rue Meslay stood within five minutes of the King's prison at the Temple.

Mary Wollstonecraft finally arrived in Paris on about 12 or

13 December 1792—almost the exact day that Wordsworth was leaving the city. She carried the obligatory tricolour cockade in her hatband (these were forced on prudent travellers at Calais, at exorbitant prices), and also caught a heavy head cold on the three-day diligence. For three weeks Johnson and her friends in London heard nothing: Mary had disappeared into the heart of the Revolution.

Once again I followed her, wandering up and down the narrow, rising thoroughfare, the home of cheap china and plumbing shops which is the modern rue Meslay, trying to make sense of her extraordinary story, to catch the echoes of her voice and the glimpses of what she had witnessed.

The broad outline of her adventure soon became clear enough. Mary's journalistic expedition of six weeks prolonged itself into a sojourn of two years, the most transforming and probably the most crucial years of her life. She remained in France during the trial and execution of Louis XVI and his family; during the declaration of war against England and her continental allies who aligned themselves against the Revolution; during the struggle for power which led to the execution of all the leading Girondists; during Robespierre's Terror and the arrest of all the English; during the wartime famine, and the terrible dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety, and the guillotining of Danton, Desmoulins and all the original heroes of the Convention; and at last into the relatively tranquil period following Thermidor—the execution of Robespierre and Saint-Just on 29 July 1794—and the repeal of the dreaded Maximum Laws.

During these hectic months she was, successively, in Paris, then at Neuilly, then at Le Havre, and finally back in Paris again for the winter of 1794–5. She wrote fifty-two extant letters, one long journalistic article for Johnson—the first of the "Letters from the Revolution", laconically entitled "On the Present Character of the French Nation"—and the first volume of a projected *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, which was published by Johnson in late 1794. But much more important than all this—and to me the biographical fact that transformed my conception of the inner nature of the revolutionary experience—she fell violently in love with a fellow-enthusiast of the French cause, and had an illegitimate child. Like Annette Vallon (though far more tragically) she was abandoned by the child's father in circumstances that led to her almost despairing of everything she believed in and had struggled to achieve. This story is now much better known, through the fine modern biography by Claire Tomalin (1974); but at the time, as I pieced it together in the retreating hopes of "*Imagination*

au Pouvoir", it came to grip my mind like one of those recurrent dreams—half mysterious symbol and half fretful nightmare—that seize on our unconscious with inexplicable power and authority during times of confused action and ill-defined aims in life. Oddly, I associated Mary's whole story with an isolated line of Wordsworth's which had nothing at all to do with Paris: "The sounding Cataract haunted me like a passion." There was something, I suppose, like a wild waterfall in the headlong, broken, plunging quality of Mary's life. I stood and gazed at it roaring through the streets of Paris, visible only to me.

4

What were Mary Wollstonecraft's initial impressions of Paris, the first liberated city of Europe? I expected a paean of praise and excitement; a wild traveller's letter full of the crowds, the Fédéré soldiers, the tricolour flags and the wall-posters, impressions of the cafés and arcades, and news of the Convention. Thomas Carlyle, in his great pageant-history of the Revolution, described the English sympathisers arriving with "hot unutterabilities in their hearts" and, having felt something of the same myself, I thought Mary would express no less.

What she actually wrote, on 24 December, was a hurried note to Evarina, saying that Madame Fillietaz was away, the servants were largely incomprehensible, she went to bed every night with a headache, and she had still "seen very little of Paris, the streets are so dirty". The one introduction she had used was that to Helen Williams, whom she described as affected in manner but with a "simple goodness of her heart" that continually broke through the varnish. "She has behaved very civilly to me and I shall visit her frequently, because I *rather* like her, and I meet French company at her house." There was only one brief observation that gave any clue to how she was really reacting. It referred to the forthcoming trial: "The day after tomorrow I expect to see the King at the bar—and the consequences that will follow I am almost afraid to anticipate."

It gradually dawned on me that Mary, for all her genuine revolutionary enthusiasm, was frightened and isolated; but being Mary, she was not going to show it—at least to her sister.

Writing much later in her *History of the Revolution*, she put some of the ambiguity of her first feelings into the description of the King

being brought by the mob from Versailles to the Tuileries. She describes how he would have been struck, as he rode down the Champs-Elysées, by the "charming boulevards, the lofty trees, the alleys and the noble buildings"; and by the way the ordinary people "walk and laugh with an easy gaiety peculiar to their nation". But then his gaze—which was really her gaze—would have rested on the great barrier towers and walls of the city, originally built in 1784 by the Fermiers-Généreaux for tax collection purposes, but now producing a terrible effect of "concentration"—an ominous word to use—and so "cutting off the possibility of innocent victims escaping from the fury, or the mistake of the moment". The barrier wall was built of stone, about twelve feet high, and enclosing a perimeter of twenty-three kilometres round the whole city along the line of the boulevards from the present place Charles de Gaulle, place Clichy, and place de la Nation on the Right Bank, to the place Denfert-Rochereau and the place d'Italie on the Left Bank. This formidable wall was guarded by sixty barrier towers, each enclosing a narrow iron gateway, controlled and guarded by troops and customs officers, and bolted for the curfew at dusk. Thus Mary felt these "magnificent porticoes", instead of being the great welcoming gateways into a new paradise, seemed insensibly to reverse their roles, and to threaten to become "gates to a great Prison", preventing anyone getting out.

It was a sharp reminder to me of the nature of eighteenth-century Paris. It was still a walled, semi-medieval, fortified city-state. The Revolution took place within a physically contained area—all exits guarded by their barrier towers—which could build up the kind of psychological pressures (rumours, mob scares, as well as the intoxications of a great carnival) impossible to imagine in a modern city, with its immense networks of roads, railways, airports and information services, constantly open to the outside world. The only modern comparison I could think of was West Berlin. The Parisians themselves invented a popular saying about the barrier wall: "*Le mur murant Paris rend Paris murmurant.*"

Moreover, just as Mary was struggling with a new language (like so many English people, she could translate fluently on the page, but became completely tongue-tied in real life—"how awkwardly I behaved, unable to utter a word and almost stunned by the flying sounds"), she was also struggling with a new language of objects. For in the revolutionary city the significance of everything external—the buildings, the behaviour of the people—depends completely on one's own degree of sympathy with the cause that they express. What is beautiful can become terrible, what is elegant something

mocking and sinister. Like the barrier towers, the meaning of everything can suddenly become ambiguous, or actually be reversed. The friendly crowd becomes a mob; the fine palace a grim prison. The pavement may open up, the front door may shut on a cell, the trusted shopkeeper *du coin* may become the *section* secret policeman.

Again, Mary put this perception in her *History*:

> But how quickly vanishes the prospect of delights, of delights such as man ought to taste! . . . The cavalcade of death moves along, shedding mildew over all the beauties of the scene, and blasting every joy! The elegance of the palaces and buildings is revolting when they are viewed as prisons; and the sprightliness of the people disgusting, when they are hastening to view the operation of the guillotine, or carelessly passing over the earth stained with blood.

These of course were early impressions viewed with the bitterness of hindsight. Yet Mary saw something even in those first days that she recorded at the time, and which clearly shook her deeply. It was the sight of the King being driven in cortège from his prison in the Temple (on the site of the present square du Temple) to his trial at the Convention.

Here arose a small but significant biographical puzzle. Mary says she saw the procession from her window in the rue Meslay. Yet the King's route on that morning of 26 December lay up the rue du Temple, and then westwards along the boulevard Saint-Martin towards the Tuileries, and I did not understand how she could have witnessed this without leaving the house and walking down to the end of the street and turning up on to the boulevard itself (which runs parallel with the rue Meslay). Yet she clearly says the King passed by her window. Surely she was not romancing? Because if she was it would be quite out of character (as I had begun to understand hers), and besides it would cast doubt on other things she said in her letters.

The solution became clear the moment I walked over the same ground. No 22 rue Meslay stands on a rising piece of land—it is, so to speak, the crown of the street—and the *back top* windows of the house have an unobstructed view clear across the rooftops to the north, commanding the whole panorama of the boulevard beyond them, from the present place de la République to what was then, and still is, the archway of the porte Saint-Martin. So Mary had, in effect, a view from the grandstand. This also, incidentally, told me that Madame Fillietaz's servants had bundled the strange

13 December 1792—almost the exact day that Wordsworth was leaving the city. She carried the obligatory tricolour cockade in her hatband (these were forced on prudent travellers at Calais, at exorbitant prices), and also caught a heavy head cold on the three-day diligence. For three weeks Johnson and her friends in London heard nothing: Mary had disappeared into the heart of the Revolution.

Once again I followed her, wandering up and down the narrow, rising thoroughfare, the home of cheap china and plumbing shops which is the modern rue Meslay, trying to make sense of her extraordinary story, to catch the echoes of her voice and the glimpses of what she had witnessed.

The broad outline of her adventure soon became clear enough. Mary's journalistic expedition of six weeks prolonged itself into a sojourn of two years, the most transforming and probably the most crucial years of her life. She remained in France during the trial and execution of Louis XVI and his family; during the declaration of war against England and her continental allies who aligned themselves against the Revolution; during the struggle for power which led to the execution of all the leading Girondists; during Robespierre's Terror and the arrest of all the English; during the wartime famine, and the terrible dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety, and the guillotining of Danton, Desmoulins and all the original heroes of the Convention; and at last into the relatively tranquil period following Thermidor—the execution of Robespierre and Saint-Just on 29 July 1794—and the repeal of the dreaded Maximum Laws.

During these hectic months she was, successively, in Paris, then at Neuilly, then at Le Havre, and finally back in Paris again for the winter of 1794–5. She wrote fifty-two extant letters, one long journalistic article for Johnson—the first of the "Letters from the Revolution", laconically entitled "On the Present Character of the French Nation"—and the first volume of a projected *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, which was published by Johnson in late 1794. But much more important than all this—and to me the biographical fact that transformed my conception of the inner nature of the revolutionary experience—she fell violently in love with a fellow-enthusiast of the French cause, and had an illegitimate child. Like Annette Vallon (though far more tragically) she was abandoned by the child's father in circumstances that led to her almost despairing of everything she believed in and had struggled to achieve. This story is now much better known, through the fine modern biography by Claire Tomalin (1974); but at the time, as I pieced it together in the retreating hopes of "*Imagination au Pouvoir*", it came to grip my mind like one of those recurrent dreams—half mysterious symbol and half fretful nightmare—that seize on our unconscious with inexplicable power and authority during times of confused action and ill-defined aims in life. Oddly, I associated Mary's whole story with an isolated line of Wordsworth's which had nothing at all to do with Paris: "The sounding Cataract haunted me like a passion." There was something, I suppose, like a wild waterfall in the headlong, broken, plunging quality of Mary's life. I stood and gazed at it roaring through the streets of Paris, visible only to me.

4

What were Mary Wollstonecraft's initial impressions of Paris, the first liberated city of Europe? I expected a paean of praise and excitement; a wild traveller's letter full of the crowds, the Fédéré soldiers, the tricolour flags and the wall-posters, impressions of the cafés and arcades, and news of the Convention. Thomas Carlyle, in his great pageant-history of the Revolution, described the English sympathisers arriving with "hot unutterabilities in their hearts" and, having felt something of the same myself, I thought Mary would express no less.

What she actually wrote, on 24 December, was a hurried note to Evarina, saying that Madame Fillietaz was away, the servants were largely incomprehensible, she went to bed every night with a headache, and she had still "seen very little of Paris, the streets are so dirty". The one introduction she had used was that to Helen Williams, whom she described as affected in manner but with a "simple goodness of her heart" that continually broke through the varnish. "She has behaved very civilly to me and I shall visit her frequently, because I *rather* like her, and I meet French company at her house." There was only one brief observation that gave any clue to how she was really reacting. It referred to the forthcoming trial: "The day after tomorrow I expect to see the King at the bar—and the consequences that will follow I am almost afraid to anticipate."

It gradually dawned on me that Mary, for all her genuine revolutionary enthusiasm, was frightened and isolated; but being Mary, she was not going to show it—at least to her sister.

Writing much later in her *History of the Revolution*, she put some of the ambiguity of her first feelings into the description of the King

Englishwoman to an obscure apartment at the back of the house, rather than give her one of the lavish guest-rooms with balcony at the front. This helps to explain what Mary subsequently says about feeling lost at the far end of a labyrinth of corridors.

Mary's description of the procession is given in her first letter to Joseph Johnson that same evening. Unlike her note to Evarina, it contains no domestic trivialities—not even a mention of Christmas Day—but goes straight into the historic scene, merely saying that she would have written earlier, but she "wished to wait till I could tell you that this day was not stained with blood" thanks to the prudent precautions taken by the National Convention "to prevent a tumult". With this slightly ominous preface, she plunges into the following remarkable account of what she saw, and how she felt:

> About nine o'clock this morning, the King passed by my window, moving silently along (except now and then a few strokes on the drum, which rendered the stillness more aweful) through empty streets, surrounded by the national guards, who, clustering around the carriage, seemed to deserve their name. The inhabitants flocked to their windows, but the casements were all shut, not a voice was heard, nor did I see any thing like an insulting gesture.—For the first time since I entered France, I bowed to the majesty of the people, and respected the propriety of behaviour so perfectly in unison with my own feelings. I can scarcely tell you why, but an association of ideas made the tears flow from my eyes, when I saw Louis sitting, with more dignity than I expected from his character, in a hackney coach going to meet his death . . .

The cinematic immediacy of this thrilled me: one could see the rows of faces behind those closed casements, looking down, like something out of a piece of early silent newsreel. Yet at the same time I was surprised and touched by Mary's tears, the last thing one might have expected from her, a good republican. She saw the whole order of power and authority stood on its head—the "majesty of the *people*". In theory she approved, but in practice she was also shocked. Here at once was that divide between Reason and Imagination; and most of her fellow-revolutionaries from England felt the same. Even Tom Paine, the most vociferous of all king-haters, was soon to go to the bar of the National Convention to plead for "Citizen Capet's" life—thereby earning Robespierre's permanent distrust.

But Mary goes much further than describing a mere political

event. She senses in herself a profound disturbance at what she had witnessed, a threat to the whole notion of personal order and safety, and this too she attempted to describe to her old friend Johnson. It is an almost unique passage in her letters, an admission of vulnerability very rare, yet done with her same matter-of-fact style and the same little gleams of self-mockery that she habitually employed. Yet it is, unmistakably, the same kind of experience that Wordsworth described in his hotel garret room. It has the same quality of confusion between reality and dream, and it even has the same candle burning symbolically on the bedside table. Again I thought of Fuseli's picture *The Nightmare*, and wondered if there were some hitherto unexplained connection between the fear of revolutionary violence erupting in the daytime and the fear of psychic violence—a disordering of the personality, as well as the society—erupting from the unconscious mind in the dark. Did the Revolution open one to both kinds of disorder?

Mary begins by explaining to Johnson that she had spent the rest of the day in the house at rue Meslay alone, and as the night came on she found the images of the procession coming back to haunt her—to possess her imagination—with increasing menace. She felt alone and isolated, and—now she says it explicitly—very frightened indeed:

> . . . Though my mind is calm, I cannot dismiss the lively images that have filled my imagination all the day.—Nay, do not smile, but pity me; for, 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. Not the distant sound of a footstep can I hear. My apartments are remote from those of the servants, the only persons who sleep with me in an immense hotel, one folding door opening after another—I wish I had even the cat with 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.

How much of this was real—the glaring eyes, the bloody hands—and how much of it was Mary's imaginary identification with the doomed King? She does not say, she does not even seem to care much, so anxious is she to impress Johnson with the power of what she has experienced. Even the company of her little Store Street cat would have made her feel less isolated from normal life. Instead there is just the image of those folding doors—one opening on to the

next, endlessly, like a looking-glass maze—to give me a new idea of what her lonely journey into the Terror involved. Receiving this letter, Johnson must have prepared himself for Mary Wollstonecraft's imminent return to London.

But Mary did not return; her natural courage and tenacity—and her belief in the Revolution—sustained her. In January 1793 the Fillietaz family returned to Paris, and she dug herself in, working hard at her spoken French, cultivating the circle round Helen Williams, and making contact with the prominent Girondists through Madame Roland. Godwin later said that she became friendly with many of the Girondist leaders in the Convention—Roland himself, Brissot, Pétion (all of whom were to be executed)—and became a popular figure in the "international brigade" of revolutionary sympathisers. He mentions a Swiss couple, Jean-Gaspard and Madeleine Schweizer; a romantically minded Polish aristocrat, Count Gustav von Schlabrendorf, who afterwards claimed he had been in love with her; and the Americans Joel and Ruth Barlow. Ruth, whom she had already met in London, became Mary's special confidante. There were also several hot-headed young adventurers who attached themselves to Helen Williams, including another American, Gilbert Imlay, and an Englishman, John Hurford Stone (who left his own wife and became Helen's lover and subsequently her husband).

In the excited and dangerous atmosphere it is clear that romantic unions flourished, as in wartime, and Mary was the object of much gallantry: a provokingly unattached woman, and a famous author as well. She seems to have liked this, but maintained her detachment, remarking somewhat archly in a letter to her other sister, Eliza, that "those who wish to live for themselves without close friendship, or warm affection, ought to live in Paris for they have the pleasantest way of whiling away time."

Some of the men were tiresome, however; particularly the tall, rangy American Imlay, whom she met at the house of Paine's friend, John Christie. He was a protégé of the Barlows', and with his knowledge of Kentucky was working on a somewhat madcap scheme with the Girondist Brissot to foment a pro-French uprising against Spanish colonial rule in the southern territories of Louisiana. He was regarded as an expert on the question, as a result of his book *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of America*; but also fancied himself as a romantic novelist, having just published in London a saga of backwoods Kentucky life—told in letters—entitled *The Emigrants*. The book extolled the simple pioneer life, and had a liberated heroine, whom Imlay seems

subsequently to have likened to Mary herself. Mary clearly thought him bumptious, while he found her unaccountably frosty. Besides, the gossip among the international set said that Imlay stayed overnight with Helen Williams. Anyway, Mary was busy with more important matters. Condorcet, who had been appointed to the special Girondist Committee on Public Instruction, had commissioned her to draw up a paper on female education: at last she seemed to be becoming directly involved with the shaping of the Revolution itself.

Yet the progress of public affairs was increasingly alarming. Possibly because of the tightening political censorship, only two letters from Mary reached England between January and June 1793, and during this time the whole aspect of the Revolution altered. On 21 January the King was executed; on 1 February England declared war on France, and a series of laws against "enemy aliens" were promulgated in Paris, beginning with special registration and passport requirements; on 25 February there were food riots in Paris, and three weeks later the first loyalist rising in the Vendée began. Finally, with growing fears of enemies both abroad and at home, on 15 April 1793 the Committee of Public Safety was instituted. From now on Mary was living in a Revolution threatened by both war and civil war.

Once again, the question arose whether Mary would now go back to London. On the declaration of war many English sympathisers followed the example of the English Ambassador and headed rapidly for the Channel ports, showing their freshly stamped passport papers at the barrier towers as they departed. The White's Hotel group effectively disbanded, and Helen Williams stopped writing special reports for *The Times*.

Mary, who had already stayed in France for more than her planned six weeks, debated with herself about her next move. During this uncertain time she wrote the essay, "On the Present Character of the French Nation", which she had originally promised Johnson, dating it 15 February. Her general thesis was not optimistic: she argued that the great and universal political ideals of the Revolution, especially as expressed by the National Assembly of 1789–91, were in the process of being betrayed by the weakness of the French as a people. Their natural volatility, their tendency to extremism, their moral shallowness, and above all the years they had spent as a subject nation beneath the authoritarian rule of the French kings completely unfitted them to act responsibly in their new historic role as revolutionary liberators. (I could not help thinking that Mary felt that the English, with their tradition of

constitutional monarchy, would have handled the whole thing much better.)

The French, in other words, lacked revolutionary *virtue*, and this would lead them away from the Paradise on Earth which all the radicals of the 1790s believed in. Mary wrote mournfully:

> Before I came to France, I cherished, you know, an opinion that strong virtues might exist with the polished manners produced by the progress of civilisation; and I even anticipated the epoch, when, in the course of improvement, men would labour to become virtuous, without being goaded on by misery. But now, the perspective of the Golden Age, fading before the attentive eye of observation, almost eludes my sight . . .

Mary's stress on revolutionary, or republican "virtue" was in fact a commonplace among radicals of every type at this time: it is found equally in the writings of William Godwin on political justice or the speeches of Robespierre on the loyalty or otherwise of the French army—though Robespierre would soon shift to the far more alarming term, "purity". What struck me was how alien this demanding concept of moral virtue in public affairs was to the attitudes of 1968. I was moving further and further away into a wholly different world-view of what a revolution required of its participants. Virtue, duty, labour . . . these were what Mary Wollstonecraft saw as essential to the new world.

Mary's apparent disillusion with the course the Revolution was now taking, together with the increasing personal restrictions applied to "aliens", suggest that this was the sensible moment to go home. Besides, in a letter to Ruth Barlow (still at this time in London, though Joel was in Paris) she says she continued to feel tired and ill, the weather was extremely bad, and she "half-ruined" herself in coach-hire. On 14 February someone in the White's Hotel group offered her a place in his private carriage which was departing for Calais: it was the moment to decide. But once again she decided to stay.

Why was this? In her letter to Ruth she is wonderfully offhand about it. She says in effect that she cannot bear to give up learning French just as she is beginning to master the language, and besides she has not finished her paper for Condorcet:

> Yesterday a Gentleman offered me a place in his carriage to return to England and I knew not how to say no, yet I think it would be very foolish to return when I have been at so much trouble to master a difficulty, when I am just turning the corner, and I am, besides, writing a plan of education for the Committee appointed to consider the subject.

Of other reasons she says nothing, though there is just a hint that the company of her fellow-expatriates was increasingly agreeable and even exciting: "I am almost overwhelmed with civility here, and have even met with more than civility . . ." Reading between the lines I could see Mary being steadily drawn into the heady, dangerous but immensely stimulating atmosphere of the city. The excitement and uncertainty obviously suited her: there was no time to be depressed as in the grey, safe and reactionary world of literary London. The more she complained about the foul Parisian streets, the insolent crowd, the "fatiguing" vivacity, the more she obviously revelled in them. However carefully she stated her theoretical objections to the Revolution it is clear that emotionally she was more and more committed to it: she knew that this was the great historical moment, and that Paris was the focus—the burning-glass—of European consciousness.

Indeed, it must have felt like the centre of the universe. Good and evil forces were inextricably mixed, as she now realised; this was not yet the Golden Age. But what was taking place was an event of historic proportions, and universal significance for later generations, and she intended not only to witness it but to take part in it if she could. As she later wrote, with extraordinary restraint and judgment at the very height of the Terror:

> All Europe saw, and all good men saw it with dread, that the French had undertaken to support a Cause, which they had neither sufficient purity of heart nor maturity of judgement, to conduct with moderation and prudence . . . [But] malevolence has been gratified by the errors they have committed, attributing that imperfection to the Theory they adopted, which was applicable only to the folly of their practice. However, Frenchmen have reason to rejoice, and posterity will be grateful, for what was done by the Assembly.

There was one other reason why Mary stayed: Gilbert Imlay, the man who was so tiresome. As the doubters fled to safety and those who remained drew closer together, meeting more frequently at Helen Williams's house or Madame Roland's salon new qualities emerged from behind formal exteriors. The brash backwoodsman turned out to have certain depths and a good deal of charm. Imlay

was from New Jersey, and had served with some distinction during the American War of Independence. As the political situation in Paris became more dangerous he became resolutely more sanguine. A friend described him as "very cheerful and high-spirited". He left off his airs of an author, and began to tease Mary with boyish good-humour. Slowly she responded, her formidable, assertive manner becoming lighter, even girlish. There is an anecdote about her bad French which she told to Ruth Barlow, and which almost certainly refers to one of Imlay's meaningful jokes: "A Gentleman the other day, to whom I frequently replied,—*oui, oui*—when my thoughts were far away, told me that I was acquiring in France a bad custom, for that I might chance to say *oui*, when I did not intend it, *par habitude*."

That she might one day say *yes*, without thinking: the joke has a faint but distinct sexual suggestion. Mary later said she was disarmed by Imlay's sudden, tender smile: it had the vulnerable look of a child who had somehow got into mischief.

It is not clear exactly how their liaison now developed (what of Imlay's supposed *faiblesse* for Helen Williams?) but it is evident that the helter-skelter pace of political events contributed a good deal. In May the first Maximum Law was passed, controlling food prices with ferocious punishments for black marketeers, and making daily life difficult and unpleasant—long queues outside the shops, shortages, curfews, sudden scares and casual violence in the streets. All householders had to post the names of their occupants on their front doors, and the whereabouts of foreigners was known and marked. The Fillietaz family began to think of leaving permanently for the country; Mary's position became awkward. She applied for a travel document to get her through the barrier, but it was not immediately granted. Then, at the end of May, Robespierre unleashed his attack on the Girondists in the Convention. Within two weeks the Rolands, Pétion, Brissot—all had been arrested, while Condorcet had escaped and was in hiding, later to commit suicide. Quite apart from the terrible shock this gave to the international group, it meant the collapse of both Mary's involvement with the Committee for Public Instruction and Imlay's Louisiana scheme with Brissot. They were effectively isolated, though Imlay, like Paine and Barlow, was protected by his American citizenship, as the national of a friendly power. Mary was not.

In the midst of this maelstrom Mary suddenly sent a rapturously happy letter to Eliza, dated 13 June, from outside Paris, but without further address or postmark. (It was almost certainly carried in

the private baggage of one of Barlow's American business contacts who still moved freely between Paris and London.) Of political affairs she says precisely, and very carefully, nothing: "I write with *reserve* because all letters are opened." But of her own situation she is radiantly yet mysteriously optimistic:

> I will venture to *promise* that brighter days are in store for you. I cannot explain myself excepting just to tell you that I have a plan in my head, it may prove abortive, in which you and Evarina are included, if you find it good, that I contemplate with pleasure as a mode of bringing us all together again. I have been endeavouring to obtain a passport a long time and did not get it till after I had determined to take a lodging in the country—for I could not think of staying any longer at Madame F's. I am now at the house of an old Gardener writing a great book; and in better health and spirits than I ever enjoyed since I came to France . . .

Mary's secret, what she could not explain, was that she and Imlay had become lovers. They were already planning—after the Revolution, should they survive it—to go to America together and seek the Golden Age there, perhaps on a farm in some far western territory. Meanwhile Mary had contrived, with the help of the Fillietaz family, to cross the barrier at Longchamp (between the present place Charles de Gaulle and the place du Trocadéro), and take rooms in an idyllic little country house at Neuilly, hidden in its own grounds, and looked after by the Fillietaz's faithful old gardener. She had brought her books and papers with her, and was embarking on her *History of the Revolution*—her "great book".

The gardener kept house for her, and brought her fruit and vegetables, especially a particular kind of grape which she adored. The old man, she later told Godwin, grew wonderfully fond and protective, "contending for the honour" of making her bed, warning her against walking alone in the woods by the Seine, and making solemn difficulties about the grapes "when she had any person with her as a visitor". Her most frequent visitor was of course Imlay, whom she would go to meet at the barrier in the summer evenings. Long after she would recall with delight the smiling, expectant look of his "barrier face".

Mary remained in her retreat at Neuilly for four months, until September 1793. It was a magical time—perhaps the happiest of her whole life. Within the turmoil of the Revolution she had

unexpectedly discovered what came to seem like her own private Garden of Eden. She was writing hard, and at the same time successfully sharing her life with someone she deeply loved. Intellectually Imlay was a stimulating companion, and constantly brought her the latest news of events in Paris, which they would discuss long into the night. Physically the relationship—which had begun, like so many others, in a small hotel in Saint-Germain—was an immense success on both sides. Indeed, from what Mary later told Godwin, it was a completely transforming experience: a revolution within her own being. "She entered into that species of connection for which her heart secretly panted . . . Now, for the first time in her life, she gave a loose to all the sensibilities of her nature." In his *Memoir*, Godwin described her sense of well-being, her excitement, her radiant glow of sheer animal exhilaration, in beautiful pre-Freudian imagery, and without a trace of jealousy:

> She was like a serpent on a rock, that casts its slough and appears again with the brilliancy, the sleekness, and the elastic activity of its happiest age. She was playful, full of confidence, kindness and sympathy. Her eyes assumed new lustre, and her cheeks new colour and smoothness. Her voice became cheerful; her temper overflowing with universal kindness; and that smile of bewitching tenderness from day to day illuminated her countenance, which all who knew her will so well recollect and which won, both heart and soul, the affection of almost everyone that beheld it.

Or, in the expressive French phrase, *Mlle Wollstonecraft était bien dans sa peau.*

No trace now remains of Mary's magic house and garden, though I long searched for it. In those days Neuilly was a country village, surrounded by woods, allotments and a network of little lanes leading down to the Seine. Now, on one side, lie the elegant parklands and shaded rides of the Bois de Boulogne; on the other, the bleak windy skyscrapers of La Défense. The sole remaining evidence of the place lies in two of her little love-notes scrawled to Imlay; the one regretting a "snug dinner" she had missed with him, but leaving the key in the door; the other begging him to cherish her, "and your own dear girl will try to keep under a quickness of feeling, that has sometimes given you pain". Though Imlay's side of the correspondence has not survived it is impossible to doubt that they were both very much in love, and constantly

anxious to be with each other. One of the notes, written at two in the morning in late July, ends:

> But good-night!—God bless you! Sterne says, that is equal to a kiss—yet I would rather give you the kiss into the bargain, glowing with gratitude to heaven, and affection to you. I like the word affection, because it signifies something habitual; and we are soon to meet, to try whether we have mind enough to keep our hearts warm.—Mary. I will be at the barrier a little after ten o'clock tomorrow.

5

Mary's love affair with Imlay was to dominate her remaining year and a half in France. Public events, and even her "great book", took second place to it; indeed, I came to feel that her deepest understanding of what the Revolution meant was produced by the emotional changes in the "little kingdom" of her own heart. She gave an entirely new importance to instinctive feeling, and sincerity of emotions.

In fact I found her to be exemplary in a more profound, indeed spiritual way than I had supposed when I first set out looking for a simple witness to events. The Revolution was, in a sense, internalised in her own biography: from the clever rational feminist to the suffering and loving woman writer with a deep understanding of her fellow-beings she had passed through a revolution of sensibility. It was only towards the end of the affair, in her *Letters Written in Sweden*—her least-known book—that she was able to write about human relationships with the tenderness and insight of the following passage:

> 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 awake affection, even in our own hearts, than the common run of people suppose. Besides, few like to be seen as they really are; and a degree of simplicity, and undisguised confidence, which, to uninterested observers, would almost border on weakness, is the charm, nay the essence of love or friendship: all the bewitching graces of childhood again appearing . . . I therefore like to see people together who have affection for each other; every turn of their features touches me.

It was perhaps that ability to be touched, never to be the "uninterested observer", that Mary learned from her time with Imlay.

Poor Gilbert Imlay! Subsequent biographers of Mary, mostly feminist writers, have torn him limb from limb. Taking their cue from Virginia Woolf, who irresistibly described his courtship of Mary as "tickling minnows" and hooking "a dolphin", they have condemned him for shallowness, bad faith, bad manners. But it never seemed like that to me.

In the first place, there is the evident and extraordinary change that he produced in Mary as a writer. In the second, there is the biographical fact–or rather lack of fact–that his side of the correspondence, and therefore his side of the story, has not survived; Imlay therefore stands undefended before the bar of history. In the third place, there is what Godwin himself described in his *Memoir*, with pointed emphasis, as Mary's own attitude long after the affair was over. "Be it observed, by the way, and I may be supposed best to have known the real state of the case, she never spoke of Mr Imlay with acrimony, and was displeased when any person, in her hearing, expressed contempt of him." Fourthly there is Mary's own noticeably difficult personality, independent and powerful and assertive, and her compensating need for demanding and equally difficult men–as her pursuit of Fuseli had shown. Finally, there was the simple truth that Imlay, in the autumn of 1793, certainly saved Mary from arrest, and possibly from execution on the grounds of her being in possession of incriminating papers–those pertaining to the Girondists, and to her *History of the Revolution*. She later said that Helen Williams had strongly advised her to burn the whole manuscript, "and to tell you the truth–my life would not have been worth much, had it been found".

To understand the critical nature of Mary's position one has to look outside the little garden at Neuilly and return to events within the barrier of Paris. The Committee of Public Safety, waging a fierce war on the eastern borders of France, had become obsessed with its own security at home. On 10 July Danton was removed from the Committee after an internal power struggle with Robespierre, and three days later Marat was assassinated in his bath by Charlotte Corday (an act which, incidentally, completely undermined the position of the remaining French feminists–Olympe de Gouges was at once arrested). Throughout September the Committee tightened its hold on the Parisian population, adopting a series of emergency powers–the Law of Suspects, the Law of 40 Sous (restricting *section* or neighbourhood meetings), the Law of General Maximum and finally, on 10 October, suspending

the entire Constitution in favour of what was in effect a military dictatorship directed by Robespierre and Saint-Just.

The revolutionary Terror was now absolute, and guillotinings took place daily. Almost the first act of the Committee within its new powers was to order the arrest of all British citizens, and on the night of 9–10 October, with ruthless efficiency, some four hundred people (the bulk of these being nuns and clergymen who had stayed in the English convents and communities in Paris) were picked up in closed carriages and taken to a special prison established at the Luxembourg. No one seems to have escaped the police sweep, organised by the notorious Fouquier-Tinville. Helen Williams, together with her sister and mother, was arrested shortly after midnight; Tom Paine–with the proofs of *The Age of Reason* in his pocket–was brought in by dawn; even Joel Barlow, vigorously protesting American citizenship (with more success than Paine), was temporarily arrested as a precautionary measure. But Mary Wollstonecraft escaped, and this was thanks to Imlay.

For in French law she was now his wife. Mary had discovered in early autumn that she was pregnant, and had insisted on leaving the safety of Neuilly to come to live with Imlay at his hotel in Saint-Germain. Seeing the inevitable course of the Committee, Imlay had taken her to the American Embassy and overriding her protests (for she still in theory regarded matrimony as bondage) he registered her as his wife and obtained for her papers of American citizenship. So when the terrible blow fell in October Mary was immune, and indeed with characteristic courage she used her papers to visit Helen and other friends in the Luxembourg. Once again, no record of this appears in her letters–the reminiscences of Godwin and Helen Williams were my source–for political censorship made it more than ever perilous to make the least reference to public affairs. What does appear in the letters is Mary's anxiety about her new responsibility, and the strain now imposed on a relationship that had begun in such freedom and high hope. How were they to domesticate a free union within the heart of a Revolution run mad, apparently intent on consuming even its most passionate supporters?

Imlay's position must have been very difficult. In saving Mary he had of course taken on responsibility for a family. Since the collapse of the Louisiana scheme he had been trying to work out with Barlow the basis of a trading company, to bring much needed imports of raw materials into France–running the blockade–from the free port of Hamburg, and through Scandinavian contacts. It was now more than ever vital that this business succeed financially,

and that terrifying brushes with the Committee of Public Safety (like Barlow's temporary incarceration) be avoided. Imlay had chosen brave and gifted people to work with, all of them natural survivors. Barlow would eventually be appointed, in 1811, Special American Envoy to Napoleon; while their Scandinavian contact, Elias Backman, was to become in 1799 the first American Consul in Sweden. But it was hectic and uncertain work, involving sudden trips out of Paris—notably to his base port at Le Havre-Marat (recently renamed). Inevitably Mary was left frequently alone. How he must have wished that she had remained in the relative safety of Neuilly! Moreover, Mary now revealed a growing distaste for his commercial projects, and far from sharing his interests began to mock him for his "business-face", openly wondering if "these continual separations" were necessary to warm his affection for her. "Of late," she wrote in October, "we are always separating.—Crack!—crack!—and away you go. This joke wears the sallow cast of thought." Imlay cannot have appreciated the sexual allusion here; or even the mocking quotation from *Hamlet*.

By the end of the year—and it was indeed a terrible one, for all the Girondists had now been executed, including Madame Roland, and the whole of Europe was now at war with France—Mary had fallen back into her old state of depression, doubting everything, from the historical outcome of the Revolution to their personal future together. Imlay must have been shaken by her bitterness.

"I hate commerce," she wrote to him in Le Havre-Marat, "how differently must [Ruth Barlow's] head and heart be organised from mine! You will tell me, that exertions are necessary: I am weary of them! The face of things, public and private, vexes me. The 'peace' and clemency which seemed to be dawning a few days ago, disappear again. 'I am fallen,' as Milton says, 'on evil days'; for I really believe that Europe will be in a state of convulsion, during half a century at least. Life is but a labour of patience: it is always rolling a great stone up a hill . . ."

If he did not come back soon, she threatened, she would throw his slippers out of the window, "and be off—nobody knows where."

But nor indeed did she. There is no indication that Mary ever seriously considered abandoning France, even at this low point. There was something tenacious and irrepressible in her spirit, stronger even than her depressions, and she seems to have got over her physical fears of the Parisian streets. One particular story about her became famous in expatriate circles at this time: crossing the place de la Révolution one morning, she slipped on a patch of wet earth, and looking down saw that the wetness was blood from the

previous day's victims. She exclaimed out loud at the horror—the injustice—of it all, and started to create a scene (I could by now vividly imagine a Wollstonecraft scene). It was only when a friendly *citoyen* drew her aside by the arm, and in a low urgent voice explained that she was attracting the attention of nearby soldiers (her French was by now excellent), that she realised her danger and hurried indignantly away. This incident was later put into a novel by Amelia Opie, *A Wife's Duty*, and became a symbol of Mary's courage during the Terror.

Besides, reading the mass of little notes she fired off to the absent Imlay in December and January, it became clear to me that the relationship, though stormy, was still very passionate. Mary's depressions were matched only by her sudden bursts of renewed high spirits. "A man is a tyrant!"—she would exclaim at one moment; and then at the next, "I do not want to be loved like a goddess; but I wish to be necessary to you. God bless you!" She would mock his "money-getting face", then suddenly picture his "honest countenance" relaxed by tenderness: "a little—little wounded by my whims; and thy eyes glistening with sympathy.—Thy lips feel softer than soft—and I rest my cheek on thine, forgetting all the world."

Whenever he came back to Paris all was well; and even his letters could have a transforming effect on her. She wrote on the night of 6 January:

> I have just received your kind and rational letter, and would fain hide my face, glowing with shame for my folly.—I would hide it in your bosom, if you would again open it to me, and nestle closely till you bade my fluttering heart be still, by saying you forgave me . . . Do not turn from me, for indeed I love you fondly, and have been very wretched, since the night I was so cruelly hurt by thinking that you had no confidence in me . . . You perceive that I am already smiling through my tears—You have lightened my heart, and my frozen spirits are melting into playfulness.

Throughout this I could see also that Mary was coming to have a much better understanding of her own nature than before: she refers to her tendency to quarrel, to be low-spirited, and the "whole torrent of emotions" that she was continually struggling to keep under control. People had thought of her as cold and intellectual, and perhaps she had sometimes thought of herself like that too: now she realised the truth was the contrary.

But what of the baby, due in May 1794, a true child of the Revolution? Understandably, Mary was anxious to rejoin Imlay on

some more permanent basis well before the birth, so she suggested that she might follow him to the port and settle in a house at Le Havre-Marat. His response seems to have amused and delighted her: "What a picture you sketched of our fire-side!" she wrote on 11 January. "Yes, my love, my fancy was instantly at work, and I found my head on your shoulder, whilst my eyes were fixed on the little creatures that were clinging about your knees. I did not absolutely determine that there should be six—if you have not set your heart on this round number."

So it was that Mary Wollstonecraft, five months pregnant and with half her "great book" written, finally passed through the barrier gates of Paris at the end of January 1794, heading for the coast. She had obtained her passport with unexpected ease, and once again she felt that she was "on the wing". How much had happened to her in the last thirteen months! And how surprised was I, her following shadow, to find that in this final stage of her journey through the Revolution almost all my own thoughts of public affairs had been banished by this affair of the heart. The natural focusing effect of biography had, in a sense, reduced the entire outcome of the Revolution to the success or failure of a single relationship, and to what occurred within "one little room".

Mary herself now felt, and admitted openly, the transforming nature of her relationship with Imlay. She who had prided herself, for half a lifetime, on her independence, her vocation as a writer, her revolutionary duty to her fellow-women, was now committed to achieving and sharing domestic happiness of the most traditional kind. "You have, by your tenderness and worth," she wrote to Imlay on the eve of her departure, "twisted yourself more artfully round my heart, than I supposed possible.—Let me indulge the thought, that I have thrown out some tendrils to cling to the elm by which I wish to be supported.—This is talking a new language for me!—But, knowing that I am not a parasitic-plant, I am willing to receive the proofs of affection, that every pulse replies to, when I think of being once more in the same house with you. God bless you! Yours truly, Mary."

6

Mary Wollstonecraft was to remain in Le Havre-Marat for the next seven months, until the autumn of 1794. Imlay had found a delightful town house, "pleasantly situated" down by the harbour in the

section des Sans-Culottes, rented from one of the flourishing English traders there, a Mr John Wheatcroft, purveyor of soap and alum. In this bustling provincial port, with a solid bourgeois tradition of Anglo-French commerce, the pressures of the Revolution seemed far away. Businessmen with American passports still moved easily across the Channel to Brighton and Newhaven (which almost had neutral status), and eastwards to the Dutch, German and Scandinavian ports. Correspondence became much easier, carried unofficially among commercial documents and not having to pass the strict customs and censorship formalities of the Parisian barrier. Imlay laughed at the idea that Mary might be able to have her books shipped down from Saint-Germain, but Ruth Barlow arranged for copies of the *Journal des Débats* and other Government decrees to be posted down from Paris on the diligence, so Mary could continue the documentation for her *History of the Revolution.*

Indeed, the main censorship danger was now on the other side, from the British Postmaster, for as it afterwards emerged in the Treason Trials of Horne Tooke, Tom Hardy and Stone's brother, William, suspicious letters from France were being carefully intercepted and copied in London, and Mary's and Helen Williams's names frequently appeared in the transcripts of cross-examinations conducted at the Old Bailey in the autumn and winter of 1794.

Mary's sense of comparative safety was increased not only by Imlay's constant presence but by the news that nearly all the English had now been released from the Luxembourg prison. Indeed most of her close friends had been freed by Christmas 1793—otherwise she might have stayed on in Paris despite everything. Tom Paine alone remained languishing in a condemned cell, slowly becoming alcoholic under the terrible tension of waiting for Robespierre's final decision on his fate, and soon to be suffering from a jail fever that threatened to anticipate the work of the guillotine.

I had to admit that I was disappointed, in a way, that Mary was no longer in the eye of the revolutionary storm. It was a cruelty, a hunger for dramatic action, that came easily to a biographer learning his métier; and formed one layer of that slight but complex sense of guilt which shadows the vicarious element in historical research into individual lives. Sometimes even I would imagine myself, like a character out of Baroness Orczy, committing Mary to some fatal escapade in the Luxembourg prison, then personally intervening to save her, with the elegant flourish of a Scarlet Pimpernel—"Your faithful biographer, Ma'am,

come to extricate you in the next paragraph, which has a secret trapdoor . . ."

Had she stayed in Paris, how I would have loved to have read her piercing comments on the female divinities Robespierre recruited, in his madness for revolutionary purity, to perform the vestal roles in his Festival of the Supreme Being, staged on the Champ-de-Mars on 8 June. But Mary's letters from Le Havre-Marat, speaking their "new language" of emotional self-discovery, were now turned upon her private situation, and slowly, almost reluctantly at first, I obeyed the fundamental dictate of biography, and followed where the materials led, to that deeper revolution of the human heart which I had not even conceived—or done more than half-glimpsed—when I first set out in the euphoria of 1968.

On 10 March, some six weeks after installing herself with Imlay, Mary wrote the first surviving letter to Evarina for over a year. Though she says nothing of the expected child—due in two months—she describes her companion with obvious affection and pride (is there even a hint that *she* had made something of a fine, wild catch?):

> If any, of the many letters that I have written, have come to your hands or Eliza's, you know that I am safe, through the protection of an American. A most worthy man, who joins to uncommon tenderness of heart and quickness of feeling, a soundness of understanding, and reasonableness of temper, rarely to be met with.—Having also been brought up in the interior parts of America, he is a most natural, unaffected creature. I am with him now at Le Havre, and shall remain there, till circumstances point out what it is necessary for me to do.

There is an odd note here too: is it faintly patronising—"a natural unaffected creature" (a noble savage)? Or is it just the old Wollstonecraft pride and self-sufficiency which makes her say, "what is necessary for *me* [not *us*] to do"? Or just a certain stiffness before her younger sister? A mixture of all these, perhaps—though it is surprising not to find a hint of what Imlay looked like: his lean dark features and the boyish smile which so enchanted her.

The immunity from censorship encouraged Mary to give Evarina her first freely expressed thoughts on the political situation, and all she had been through in Paris. It is still phrased in generalities—it was perilous to mention any public figure by more than an initial—but it shows the weight of her experiences and strikes a new, elegiac note. She speaks indeed like someone who has come

through fire; like a combat veteran returning from a war that cannot really be explained to those who have remained, safe in their beds at home. She no longer thinks of herself as an adventurer, but as a survivor:

> It is impossible for you to have any idea of the impressions the sad scenes I have been a witness to have left on my mind. The climate of France is uncommonly fine, the country pleasant, and there is a degree of ease, and even simplicity, in the manners of the common people, which attaches me to them.—Still death and misery, in every shape of terror, haunts this devoted country.—I certainly am glad that I came to France, because I never could have had else a just opinion of the most extraordinary event that has ever been recorded.—And I have met with some uncommon instances of friendship, which my heart will ever grately store up, and call to mind when the remembrance is keen of the anguish it has endured for its fellow creatures, at large:—for the unfortunate beings cut off around me—and the still more unfortunate survivors.

There is no mistaking the literal horror of that "cut off"; and no more airy talk of "meddling with edged tools". Her voice has lost much of its matter-of-factness, it is sorrowful and more than a little bewildered.

Throughout March and April Mary quietly laboured away at her book, went for walks by the sea and thought about her baby. News of the Terror filtered down from Paris, like a distant rumbling storm, in letters from Ruth Barlow and Helen Williams. On 5 April, Helen saw Danton and Desmoulins taken in a cart to the guillotine, but her account is curiously unfeeling: perhaps she was too stunned by it all: "I saw them pass—they seemed indifferent to their fate. I think I never saw such an assemblage of people. I was in a carriage going to the rue Saint-Honoré, but the coachman could not possibly pass the pont Neuf—I wonder criminals are not allowed to be executed in a more private manner."

What a wonderfully absurd remark—as if it were nothing more than a traffic hold-up. Unlike Mary's letters, it is also inaccurate: we know from other witnesses that poor Desmoulins wept and raged till the last, begging to see his young wife. I imagined Helen sitting well back in her coach with her eyes shut.

On 16 April all foreigners were finally ordered out of Paris by the Committee, on pain of death. Helen went to Marly, with Stone, then on to Switzerland; Ruth joined her husband Joel in Hamburg;

Paine remained in his feverish cell. Mary was anxious whenever Imlay was away, and wrote more fondly than ever:

> I could not sleep.—I turned to your side of the bed, and tried to make the most of the comfort of the pillow, which you used to tell me I was churlish about; but all would not do.—I took nevertheless my walk before breakfast, though the weather was not very inviting—and here I am, wishing you a finer day, and seeing you peep over my shoulder, as I write, with one of your kindest looks—when your eyes glisten, and a suffusion creeps over your relaxing features.

She took on a maid to help her in the house, and ordered white calico gowns for the baby and linen shirts for Imlay. Writing to Ruth, she began to talk of "us" and "we", remarking in a deliberate parody of her own feminist manner: "You perceive that I am acquiring the matrimonial phraseology without having clogged my soul by promising obedience etc etc."

By the end of April the first volume of the *History* was finished, and the manuscript sent over to Johnson in London; a great relief to her. There is some evidence that she had become bored with it: reviewers were to say that it consisted largely in copying out official documents. It is certainly her dullest work, and Johnson himself must have been disappointed that it broke off with the trial of the King in 1792—thus leaving out everything that she had witnessed in Paris thereafter. I came to think that Mary simply could not face writing publicly about what she had seen; it is only in her *Letters Written in Sweden* that she begins to reflect openly on some of the experiences she had undergone—and then only in brief asides. Writing, for example, of the vaunted patriotism of the Norwegians, she remarks: "They love their country, but have not much public spirit. Their exertions are, generally speaking, only for their families; which I conceive will always be the case, till politics, becoming a subject of general discussion, enlarges the heart by opening the understanding. The French Revolution will have this effect."

But she also says, in another place, looking at the magnificent landscapes of fjords and mountains, that for the first time "I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature . . ."

Mary Wollstonecraft's baby, a little girl, was born at Le Havre-Marat on 14 May 1794; or, as the birth certificate stated, on the 25th day of Floreal in the Second Year of the Republic.

The Register was witnessed by "*citoyen Gilbert Imlay, négociant américain*"; and the child christened Fanny Imlay—the forename standing as a touching memorial to Mary's soul-sister, Fanny Blood. The French midwife observed proudly that Madame had treated the labour so lightly that she "ought to make children for the Republic". Mary naturally broke the bourgeois convention and breast-fed Fanny herself; at which Imlay teased her—as she told Ruth: "My little Girl begins to suck so *manfully* that her father reckons saucily on her writing the second part of *The Rights of Woman.*" He showed her "constant tenderness" and affection—despite all the "continual hinderances" in his business affairs and the "whipping embargoes" on his ships—and she felt great pleasure at being a mother.

Indeed the Revolution had brought her a happiness she had never expected. For the next three months there was almost complete domestic silence from the little household. In Paris the guillotine rose and fell with increasing regularity, moving ever closer to Robespierre himself, and a single cry of anguish escaped Mary, writing to Ruth on 8 July: "The French will carry all before them—but, my God, how many victims fall beneath the sword and the Guillotine! My blood runs cold, and I sicken at thoughts of a Revolution which costs so much blood and bitter tears."

But for the rest it was wordless tranquillity, their backs stubbornly turned against a world of horrors, their hopes concentrated in a little smiling face, oblivious to all but milk and love.

This odd, slightly overwritten last phrase of mine stayed in my head for many months. It was only slowly that I came to realise its oddness was important, that it signified something I could not really express. It was not so much fulsome and sentimental as hollow and empty of sentiment. It covered, in fact, a biographical gap. It was the substitute for a kind of information to which, as a biographer, I simply could not get access. To begin with I thought of this material as something slightly abstruse and poetic. In Mary's happiness as a mother, in her act of breast-feeding, I felt sure there was a way of drawing some contrast between the milk of her maternity and the blood of the Revolution. She had come out to France to witness the "blood of freedom", as it were, but what she had actually discovered was something even more fundamental, "the milk of human kindness". I saw that contrast between milk and blood strongly in her letters, and I wanted some way of showing that she had grown conscious of it. I wanted in fact to make her something that she wasn't—a poet. Whereas what I really needed to show was something much simpler, but in the end more

remarkable: that this extraordinary and exceptional woman had become a mother—just like any other.

But that ordinariness, and that family intimacy, is the very thing that the biographer—as opposed to the novelist—cannot share or re-create. Tolstoy in the opening of *Anna Karenina* writes that all happy families are happy in the same way; he might have added, that they leave little record of that happiness, even though it is the stuff of life. The very closeness of husbands and wives precludes letters between them, and often the keeping of journals (unless one party is secretly unhappy). The private, domestic world closes in on itself, and the biographer is shut out. It is only when arguments occur, separations, confrontations, crises—or the sudden revelation in a letter to a friend, or a melancholy diary-entry—that the biographer's trail warms up again.

I found something sad and unbalanced in this, almost as if the biographer were doomed to feed upon other people's struggles and miseries; like a doctor, he rarely seemed to see his patients in the bloom of health and contentment. I have since come to believe that the re-creation of the daily, ordinary texture of an individual life—full of the mundane, trivial, funny and humdrum goings-on of a single loving relationship—in a word, the re-creation of *intimacy*—is almost the hardest thing in biography; and, when achieved, the most triumphant.

I seemed to have no hope of discovering this intimacy between Mary and Imlay and their child at Le Havre-Marat; yet without it an important element in Mary's story, and the nature of her experience in France, was missing. For the story itself was nearly over: in the autumn of 1794 Imlay was to leave for London, and in the spring of the following year Mary would follow him. A different and better-known chapter of her life would begin: quarrels, separations, suicide attempts, the journey to Scandinavia and the liaison with William Godwin, her second husband.

Eventually I had one small stroke of luck which led me to a tiny fragment of material that no previous biographer seems to have considered. In the British Library there is a rare four-volume edition of Mary's *Posthumous Works*, edited by Godwin and published by the ever-faithful Joseph Johnson in 1798, one year after her death. Volume Two contains her last, unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Women, or, Maria*, and bound into the back—but not mentioned in the contents list—are a dozen fragmentary pages entitled "Lessons for Children".

Mary's note from the manuscript says that it was the first part of a series, "which I intended to have written for my unfortunate

girl"; while Godwin's editorial preface adds that it was probably "written in a period of desperation in the month of October 1795". But what was important to me was that in drafting these fourteen "Lessons"—teaching her child early vocabulary, simple guides to conduct and ways of learning to appreciate and understand the people and animals around her—Mary had drawn on her own secret memories of the time of family happiness that had existed in the first few months after Fanny's birth. In other words, it gave me a small but precious glimpse into that lost world of intimacy.

Strictly speaking, the "Lessons" recall a time when Fanny was beginning to crawl and talk, so they cannot refer to events in the household much before the winter of 1794 (though there is mention of weaning). However, the picture they give is somehow timeless, or outside time. I was tempted to think of domestic events as operating on a different timescale from that of the external, historical time of the Revolution; a slower rhythm altogether, more like the rhythm of plants or animals; so that it did not seem false to build this into my picture of Mary and Imlay together at this point, before their final separation in France. Indeed, in her memories I think Mary actually pushed them back to the time of their first happiness together, for the "Papa" figure of the "Lessons" is a radiant, smiling presence, only a little anxious or tired sometimes from overwork.

The first three Lessons present a child's basic vocabulary, and the natural order of things in and around their house. "The bird sings. The fire burns. The cat jumps. The dog runs. The cow lies down. The man laughs. The child cries." It seems somehow inevitable that the man should be laughing—his birthright. We also see Mary's instinctive combination of discipline and love in dealing with Fanny. "Hide your face. Wipe your nose. Wash your hands. Dirty mouth. Why do you cry? A clean mouth. Shake hands. I love you. Kiss me now. Good girl." Was it only my imagination that brought the little scene alive with Mary's suddenly tender voice?

In Lesson Seven there is a discussion of crying, and how we all have to accept being hurt, and from that a memory of weaning:

> At ten months you had four pretty white teeth, and you used to bite me. Poor Mamma! Still I did not cry, because I am not a child, but you hurt me very much. So I said to Papa, it is time the little girl should eat . . . Yes, says Papa, and he tapped you on the cheek, you are old enough to learn to eat? Come to me, and I will teach you, my little dear, for you must not hurt poor Mamma, who has given you her milk, when you could not take anything else.

In Lesson Eight there is a vivid picture of Fanny getting Papa to play with her. Mary reminds Fanny that she could still only crawl, and her "running" across the room was "quick, quick, on your hands and feet like a dog". Then she describes the scene, with deft and simple touches and explanations, which catch the charm of family life better than anything I ever found in her novels:

> Away you ran to Papa, and putting both your arms round his leg, for your hands were not big enough, you looked up at him, and laughed. What did this laugh say, when you could not speak? Cannot you guess by what you now say to Papa?—Ah! it was, Play with me, Papa!—play with me! Papa began to smile, and you knew that smile was always—Yes. So you got a ball, and Papa threw it along the floor—roll, roll, roll; and you ran after it again—and again. How pleased you were!

Nothing could be more simple, yet Mary's delight in the love between father and child is perfectly eloquent.

In Lesson Nine there is a list of Fanny's accomplishments, which includes a momentary glimpse of the Fédéré soldiers: "You can trundle a hoop, you say; and jump over a stick. O, I forgot!—and march like the men in the red coats, when Papa plays a pretty tune on the fiddle."

It is nice to think of Imlay playing the violin, Kentucky-style perhaps, while Fanny pranced like a conquering hero.

Finally, in Lesson Fourteen, there is a glimpse into what must have been the growing tensions in the household, and for the first and only time we see "Papa" distracted by outside affairs and business. Mary is teaching Fanny about what she calls "thinking". Mary's "thinking" has nothing to do with schoolroom learning—in fact, all the Lessons are free from any hint of formal teaching. Thinking means *imagining* how someone else feels, and what effect your behaviour will have on them. (Indeed, it is very close to loving.) She begins the lesson by recalling how once, when Mary had a headache, Fanny made a noise and Papa had to tell her to be quiet; and how Fanny learned from this. Mary explains it all with quick intuitive humour—itself a beautiful demonstration of the imagination at work on her little child's mind:

> You say that you do not know how to think. Yes, you do a little. The other day Papa was tired; he had been walking about all the morning. After dinner he fell asleep on the sofa. I did not bid you be quiet; but you thought of what Papa said to you when *my* head

> ached. This made you think that you ought not to make a noise, when Papa was resting himself. So you came to me, and said to me, very softly—Pray reach me my ball, and I will go and play in the garden, till Papa wakes. You were going out, but thinking again, you came back to me on your tiptoes. Whisper—whisper! Pray Mama, call me, when Papa wakes; for I shall be afraid to open the door to see, lest I should disturb him. Away you went. Creep—creep—and shut the door as softly as I could have done myself. That was thinking.

Again, it is completely simple—one moment of domestic intimacy seen through the eyes of a child. (Was Imlay often tired now, did he get irritable more often, was his cheerfulness disappearing? Perhaps.) But to me, in the midst of all the public drama of Mary's life, it gave a sense of the new emotional centre that had been created in Mary's world, and the change that this must have produced in her whole outlook. It altered everything.

7

The moment of intimacy was soon over. On 26 July 1794 the opposition to Robespierre finally asserted itself in the Convention, and within three days he and Saint-Just were executed and the extreme wing of the Jacobins in Paris was destroyed in the coup d'état of Thermidor.

Almost at once Imlay set out for Paris, determined to exploit the commercial opportunities of the liberalised régime, and Mary's letters begin again in August. Soon it appears she is worried and discontented, and deeply uncertain about their future. Without Imlay life in Le Havre-Marat is boring—full of "fat-bottomed" nymphs and cupids on the mantelpiece, and the dull faces of "square-headed money-getters". Moreover they disagree about each other's attitudes. Imlay says Mary lacks judgment, Mary that Imlay lacks feeling.

"I will allow you to cultivate my judgment," she writes, "if you will permit me to keep alive the sentiments in your heart, which may be termed romantic, because, the offspring of the senses and the imagination, they resemble the mother more than the father, when they produce the suffusion I admire.—In spite of icy age, I hope still to see it, if you have not determined only to eat and drink, and be stupidly useful to the stupid."

The sarcasm in Mary's tone hardly requires comment, and it is repeated in the other letters of August. Clearly all was not well, and I suspected that Imlay's reasons for going to Paris so precipitously were not entirely commercial: Mary was proving a demanding wife with whom to live.

But there was another side to these letters, softer and more affectionate, which showed the transformation in Mary's outlook in an almost philosophical way. It appears in the wholly new emphasis she gave to human affections and the faculty of the imagination in forming them.

Writing on 19 August of the growth of her feelings for her child—"my affections grow on me, till they become too strong for my peace"—she expressed it quite simply in the capacity to love. Her attitude towards their little girl was "at first very reasonable—more the effect of reason, a sense of duty, than feeling—now, she has got into my heart and imagination, and when I walk out without her, her little figure is ever dancing before me." The same thing had happened to her feelings for Imlay—she does not know how—but he possesses her even in his absence. "You too have somehow clung round my heart—I found I could not eat my dinner in the great room—and, when I took up the large knife to carve for myself, tears rushed into my eyes. Do not however suppose that I am melancholy—for, when you are from me, I not only wonder how I can find fault with you—but how I can doubt your affection."

But of course Mary did not intend to accept that absence for long. In early September, growing impatient with his explanations, she suddenly closed up the house at Le Havre-Marat and took the diligence for Paris. It appears to have been a nightmare journey. Fanny was teething and had only recently recovered from small-pox; the maid had announced that she was pregnant, and naturally Mary would not abandon her; while the coach, overladen and badly driven (a metaphor of the present chaos in France), overturned no less than four times. Imlay seems to have taken rooms for them all in one of their old hotels in Saint-Germain, but the reunion was ominously brief. Within a few days urgent business called him away—this time to London.

Now at last Mary really did begin to feel abandoned: she was not to see her husband again for six months. All that was left to her were the few remaining members of the expatriate circle—the Schweizers, Count von Schlabrendorf and a new recruit, Archie Hamilton-Rowan, a genial Irish lawyer and active member of the United Irishmen, who had already been prosecuted in Dublin for sedition.

Rowan vividly recalled his first sight of Mary, as she walked into one of their soirées, defiantly accompanied by little Fanny. "[A friend] whispered to me that she was the author of the *Rights of Woman*. I started. 'What!' I said within myself, 'this is Miss Mary Wollstonecraft parading about with a child at her heels, with as little ceremony as if it were a watch she had just bought at the jeweller's. So much for the rights of women,' thought I."

In fact Rowan quickly became a close friend of Mary's, frequently took "a dish of tea" and some good conversation with her, and when finally Mary left France her last letters were to him, affectionately recalling his help and support—one more conversion to the cause.

Writing to Evarina at the end of September, Mary tried to put the best face on things, describing Imlay as "a brother you would love and respect—I hope the time is not very distant when we shall all meet", and endearingly singing the praises of her child. "I want you to see my little girl, who is more like a boy—She is ready to fly away with spirits—and has eloquent health in her cheeks and eyes—She does not promise to be a beauty, but appears *wonderfully* intelligent; and, though I am sure she has her father's quick temper and feelings, her good humour runs away with all the credit of my good nursing . . ."

But in her many letters to Imlay in London—there are sixteen of them between September 1794 and April 1795—she runs the gamut of emotions, from tearful melancholy despair to sudden, high-spirited teasing; from bitter, depressed reflections on the Revolution to jaunty headstrong thoughts about the future that Liberty may eventually bring them all. Sometimes she makes Paris catch something of the glamour of their earliest days together:

> I am making a progress in the language among other things. I have also made some new acquaintance. I have almost *charmed* a judge of the tribunal, R---, who, though I should not have thought it possible, has humanity, if not *beaucoup d'esprit*. But let me tell you, if you do not make haste to come back, I shall be half in love with the author of the "Marseillaise", who is a handsome man, a little too broad-faced or so, and plays sweetly on the violin.

No doubt little Fanny also liked the violin of Rouget de l'Isle, a forty-year-old army officer, as well as the musical hero of the Republic: it would have reminded her of Papa.

In other letters, however, Mary is overwhelmingly bitter, and obviously suspects Imlay's sexual fidelity. Indeed, in the spring, it is known that he took up with a young actress in London.

> I consider fidelity and constancy as two distinct things; yet the former is necessary, to give life to the other . . . You know my opinion of men in general; you know that I think them systematic tyrants, and that it is the rarest thing in the world, to meet with a man with sufficient delicacy of feeling to govern desire. When I am thus sad, I lament that my little darling, fondly as I doat on her, is a girl.—I am sorry to have a tie to a world that for me is ever sown with thorns.

Without Imlay's side of the correspondence, it remains difficult to judge fairly between them. All we know is that he continued to write regularly ("your hasty *notes*"); continued to support Mary and Fanny financially (volume II of the *History of the Revolution* was not being written, and Mary could expect no further advances from Johnson); and continued to talk of the "permanent views and future comfort" of their life together. Yet when he wrote that "our being together is paramount to every other consideration", Mary regarded his declaration as a cheat and an insult; and surely she was right to do so. None the less it was Imlay who finally persuaded Mary to return to England in April 1795—something that the most dangerous moments of the Revolution had not succeeded in doing.

There is one passage in this increasingly tragic exchange of letters which stands out with a kind of magnificence, far beyond the immediate clash of personalities, and which places Mary on a philosophical high ground above the immediate experience of the Revolution and her revolutionary love affair. It concerns the powers of the Imagination in the human heart, and it looks forward with prophetic insight to the major creative work of the next generation of the Romantics—to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), and to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). In the latter case I was to discover a connection that was indeed a direct and touching one. For when in July 1814 the young Shelley eloped to France with Mary Godwin, Mary brought with her a special travelling box, containing all her mother's works including the *Letters to Imlay* which Godwin had edited. Their shared journal records that they opened this box on their first night together in Paris, at the Hotel de Vienne. So, in an odd way, the circle was completed: or rather—for me—it was started up once more.

Mary first recalls to Imlay their early happiness together, during

the Neuilly days: "There is nothing picturesque in your present pursuits; my imagination then rather chooses to ramble back to the barrier with you, or to see you coming to meet me, and my basket of grapes.—With what pleasure do I recollect your looks and words, when I have been sitting on the window, regarding the waving corn!"

In a way this says everything about their love: how excitingly it had been launched amid the storm and danger of the Terror—which brought out the best in both of them—and then ran aground and wrecked in the calmer and safer months that followed. It was essentially a "barrier affair", one of those thousands of relationships, passionate and spontaneous, that so often start up in times of war or crisis—the fire of life burning more brightly in the mouth of destruction—but which rarely survive a time of peace and security. What use are recriminations in such matters?

Mary then goes on, in her best style, half-mocking at first, but gradually gathering passion and seriousness to produce what is in effect a hymn to the Imagination—and what was, for me, a new definition, in a new language, of *Imagination au Pouvoir*:

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

"Imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven": here at last the cool, rationalist Mary was speaking like a full-blooded Romantic, seeing man's finest aspect in the rebellious, Promethean element in his character which will never settle for "the conclusions of Reason" or the "comforts" of society. It is what he is capable of imagining which alone "expands his heart" and makes him truly—and in a rapturous, revolutionary sense—"social".

But what did this mean in terms of Mary's original hopes of the French Revolution, her glimpse of the Golden Age? In one sense it is clearly a retreat, a revulsion even from the extreme calculating

rationalism of the Jacobins, and a rejection of public revolutionary
action in favour of the more inward, enduring truths of the heart.
Mary's glimpse of the Golden Age was not in the National Convention, or on the boulevards of Paris, but in the friendly salons of the
Girondists and in the lovers' garden at Neuilly with its prospect of
the corn harvest.

Yet Mary Wollstonecraft did not simply retreat into a sentimental,
conservative, "feminine" view of family life and the sacredness of
personal relationships. Far from it—she remained a social rebel
to the end. To her critique of the French as a nation historically
unprepared for revolution, she added a much broader understanding of the human qualities required to make a transformation in
public affairs. She pointed, as I saw it, precisely to the Romantic
revolution—that "expansion of the heart"—which would be needed
to make real and enduring social progress in the coming age.
Central to this perception remained the concept of "rights"—the
rights of woman and the rights of man—and the pre-eminent need
for feeling and imagination to shape and reform the entire social
fabric, and the institutions which governed it. This it seemed to me
was the essential inheritance which she left to the next generation,
and beyond.

In practical terms, Mary's loyalty to France and the sufferings of
her people remained unshaken to the end. In October 1794 she had
already seen that the Terror would never return: "The liberty of
the press will produce a great effect here. —*The cry of blood will not be in vain!*—Some more monsters will perish—and the Jacobins are
conquered."

Yet the winter of 1794–5 was extremely harsh. Though the
Maximum Laws were repealed there were something like famine
conditions within the barrier, the weather was bitterly cold and
Mary took turns with her maidservant queuing for food and wood.
She caught a violent chest cold and a hacking cough, which by
February convinced her that she had "a galloping consumption".
She gave up the Saint-Germain hotel and moved in with a German
couple, who had a child the same age as Fanny, and who were
living "just above poverty". She sank her own griefs in those
around her, writing on 10 February: "This has been such a period
of barbarity and misery, I ought not to complain of having my
share. I wish one moment that I had never heard of the cruelties
that have been practised here, and the next envy the mothers who
have been killed with their children."

She felt bitterly the humiliation of having to apply for money
from Imlay, through the American business agent he had left in the

city. "I have gone half a dozen times to the house to ask for it, and
come away without speaking—you may guess why." Yet when, at
the end of February, Imlay began to insist that she return to
London—evidently worried about her health, and that of the child
—she expressed horror at the idea of England, adding that she did
not believe anyway that he would stay with her, but would embark
on another project in Germany or Scandinavia:

> What! is our life then only to be made up of separations? am I only to return to a country that has not merely lost all charms for me, but for which I feel a repugnance that almost amounts to horror, only to be left there a prey to it! Why is it so necessary that I should return?—brought up here, my girl would be freer. Indeed, expecting you to join us, I had formed some plans of usefulness that have now vanished with my hopes of happiness.

What plans of "usefulness" these were we do not know—did Mary
have ideas perhaps for an English-speaking school in Paris, or
publication of her paper on female education? Her attitude shows
that she was far from disenchanted with France, even now.

None the less, at the beginning of April, yielding to Imlay's
entreaties, she passed through the barrier for the last time, packed
into the coach with Fanny, her new maid Marguerite, her salvaged
books and papers and the few bits of clothing and crockery she still
owned. The great towers of the Paris barriers, with their bitter,
ambiguous memories, dropped behind her on the road and they
travelled down to Le Havre where they stopped at Wheatcroft's
house for the final few days. On 7 April Mary wrote to Imlay
saying that she was "on the wing" towards him—the same phrase
that she had used thirty long months ago before leaving London.
She was so full of conflicting emotions—sadness and yet relief at
leaving; hope and yet fear for the future—that she sat on the
harbour wall, gazing blankly at the choppy spring waters of the
Channel:

> I sit, lost in thought, looking at the sea—and tears rush into my eyes when I find that I am cherishing any fond expectations. I have indeed been so unhappy this winter, I find it as difficult to acquire fresh hopes, as to regain tranquillity.—Enough of this —Lie still, foolish heart!—But for the little girl, I could almost wish that it should cease to beat, to be no more alive to the anguish of disappointment.

Her last act on French soil was characteristically practical. She arranged for a "little store of provisions" to be locked in a closet in a kitchen of the house, so that should Archie Hamilton-Rowan or any other member of the United Irishmen come through Le Havre-Marat (there was talk of Wolfe Tone's associate Thomas Russell fleeing from Dublin), there would at least be food for them. "Pray take care of yourself," she scrawled to Rowan, "direct to me at Mr Johnson's, St Paul's Churchyard, London, and wherever I may be the letter will not fail to reach me . . . I neither like to say, or write, *adieu.*"

So, on 9 April 1795, Mary Wollstonecraft finally left France. Instead of the tricolour cockade she now carried a small child wearing the bright red sash she had bought for her at one of the republican fêtes in Paris. Here was the only symbol of hope left to her.

In a way, I think I never really came to a conclusion about Mary's experiences in the Revolution. In one sense, what happened to her was a personal tragedy, and this aspect is emphasised by much of what she suffered subsequently. Putting it in its barest, harshest form, it was this: in April 1795 she found Imlay was living with another woman in London, and tried to commit suicide by an overdose of laudanum; between June and August she travelled on business for him in Scandinavia; in September she returned to London, and on the night of 10 October 1795 tried to drown herself by jumping off Putney Bridge. The following year she published her *Letters Written in Sweden*, and began her affair with William Godwin. But on 10 September 1797, eleven days after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary, she died from septicaemia. This sequence of catastrophes only reached its end in 1816, when Fanny Imlay, then aged twenty, herself committed suicide by an overdose of opium at a lonely inn in South Wales. It is a tale of such unhappiness it is easy to draw the moral that Mary should never have gone to Paris in the first place.

But of course biography, as I slowly came to realise, does not draw this kind of moral. It sees a more complicated and subtle pattern. Even out of worldly "failure" and personal suffering (indeed perhaps especially from these) it finds creative force and human nobility—and what are more important values than these? Mary's story in France astonished me: her courage and tenacity, as well as her marvellous honesty as a witness to her own revolutionary experiences, made her a woman in a million. She was exemplary in a way that completely altered my conception of what "the Revolution" was about. Most important of all, she directed me

away from any cynical or over-hasty reaction to 1968 and made me realise that conclusions lie in the long term, in the next generation, in the "seeds of time".

For the real impact of the French Revolution, as far as the English were concerned, lay in the thirty years after Mary's death: in the generation of Byron, Shelley, Hazlitt, Keats, Mary Shelley—one of the most brilliant literary circles that has ever existed—all of whom returned to Europe, regarding it as deeply and truly "their business". To them, and most especially to the Shelleys, Mary Wollstonecraft was a bright star, permanently on the horizon. When, in the spring of 1814, Shelley and Mary pledged their love on Mary Wollstonecraft's tombstone in Old St Pancras Churchyard, the flame was consciously carried forward; and I went with it. (I am happy to see that the church is still illuminated by Camden Council every evening until after midnight.)

Moreover, even in Mary Wollstonecraft's final years there was a sense in which her tragedy became a triumph. Her love for William Godwin healed many of the wounds that Gilbert Imlay had caused, and it is one of the most intriguing of all biographical footnotes that in her last months Mary decided to write a stage play about her experiences in Paris. It is only a footnote because Godwin subsequently burnt the manuscript; but he tells us one wonderfully provoking fact about the play. It was a *comedy*. The accusers of Imlay should think hard about that.

The last of the many portraits of Mary was painted by John Opie (husband of the novelist Amelia) in 1797, probably when she was pregnant with her second child, the future Mary Shelley. Once again she has undergone a transformation. Her face is softer and more open, her thick chestnut hair tucked casually up under a green velvet cap, and her loose white linen dress falling in relaxed folds. She looks more confident in the world than ever before, and if there is something sad and thoughtful in those large eyes of hers it gives her a romantic presence, a contained power and an imaginative force which is new and impressive. It is this portrait that now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, properly among her peers, a celebrity.

I do not think Mary ever solved the conflict between Reason and Imagination. But equally I cannot think that she ever quite gave up her vision of the Golden Age. In her *Letters Written in Sweden*, the last published and best written of all her books (Godwin said it was the kind of book that made you immediately fall in love with its author), she made many reflections on her time in France, and the hopes and ideals that were still vital to her. In her thirteenth letter,

written while crossing one August morning into Norway, she was told of the brave independent life led by the inland farmers of the far north, and finding some secret spring touched off inside her she wrote the following passage:

> The description I received of them carried me back to the fables of the Golden Age: independence and virtue; affluence without vice; cultivation of mind without depravity of heart;—with "ever-smiling liberty" the nymph of the mountain. I want faith! My imagination hurries me forward to seek an asylum in such a retreat from all the disappointments I am threatened with; but reason drags me back, whispering that the world is still the world, and man the same compound of weakness and folly, who must occasionally excite love and disgust, admiration and contempt.

It was this dilemma that I carried with me, into the next generation of writers, poets and witnesses. My pursuit had begun.

THREE

1972 : Exiles