

Property in Political Economy
Modernity, Individuation, and Literary Form

How silent is now Versailles!¹

Part-way through her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), Wollstonecraft describes a ‘pensive wanderer’ visiting the now-abandoned palace of Versailles. Mounting its ‘sumptuous stair-case’ and reflecting on the ‘nothingness of grandeur’, the visitor reflects that ‘this was the palace of the great king’, an ‘abode of magnificence’ which now only inspires ‘pity’. Shifting back into narratorial mode, Wollstonecraft recounts the ‘eagerness’ with which she described the attack on the Bastille, which ‘tumbled into heaps of ruins’ the ‘walls that seemed to mock the resistless force of time’. The fall of that particular ‘temple of despotism’ speaks too to the collapse of the power of court and monarchy located at Versailles, a substitutive logic which is perhaps necessary, given that Versailles’s palace still stands. Yet, running counter to the would-be implications of such images of ruin, Wollstonecraft goes on to comment that ‘despotism’ still stands in the current era of ‘licentious freedom’, and she looks in vain for a ‘change of opinion, producing a change of morals’ which will render France ‘truly free’, when ‘truth’ will ‘give life ... real magnanimity’, when justice will ‘place equality on a stable seat’, and when ‘private virtue’ will ‘become the guarantee of patriotism’. Government, she concludes, will be perfected when citizens are virtuous.

Wollstonecraft’s train of thought here moves swiftly beyond the images of property, both standing and fallen, with which it began, into a realm of more explicitly political thought which pulls towards abstractions – truth, freedom, justice, equality. Such abstractions though, by virtue of her very invocation of them, are unlocated and unlocatable, homeless and disembodied, caught in a much-desired future which is yet to arrive. Equality and all its fellows lack a ‘stable seat’. But although the chapter ends on this anticipatory note, somewhere between hope and despair, something of

an answer as to where such virtues might be housed has already been suggested in the penultimate paragraph's account of 'smiling' nature presenting to the imagination, as it contemplates the empty gardens of Versailles, 'materials to build farms, and hospitable mansions, where, without raising idle admiration, that gladness will reign, which opens the heart to benevolence, and that industry, which renders innocent pleasure sweet'. The power of such a vision has 'broken the charm' which 'the palace of the great king' would otherwise inspire, enabling 'only pity' to be prompted in the onlooker.² This is a vision which replaces not only one kind of property (the palace) for another (the farm and the hospitable home), but which rewrites too the affective qualities which each prompts from the viewer: 'gladness', 'benevolence', and 'innocent pleasure' replace the 'charm' of 'idle admiration'. If the possible futures sought by the abstractions of political thought are eventually articulated, somewhat belatedly, in the chapter's very final sentences, the forms or embodiment which they lack have already here been presented to the imagination by beneficent nature. Whilst philosophical despair emerges as the keynote of the chapter's final cadences, pity lurks as an alternative, would the imagination only attend to the possibilities which nature depicts.

Wollstonecraft's 'pensive wanderer' anticipates the melancholy traveler depicted in her next publication, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), a work rarely read in relation to the *View*, despite the brief period of only two years between their publication. Properties of various kinds, from primitive huts to hospitable family homes, from prosperous farms to the houses of merchants and sailors, are among the objects on which Wollstonecraft trains her 'philosophic eye', as well as her Romantic sensibility, in that work, together with the social formations and economic behaviours (the family, the household, relations between parents and children, or masters and servants; agriculture, commerce, trade, consumption) which they suggest. In this concern with property in different forms, and the affective response which it prompts, Wollstonecraft engages with a central preoccupation of eighteenth-century political economic and moral thought. Property was conceptually fundamental to contemporary political economy: the natural jurisprudence tradition of the seventeenth century, from which political economy grew, had made property and its defence the basis of the nation state; security of property was fundamental to the generation of wealth which political economy theorised. Property might take many forms, including land, the products of work, and rights of ownership; most troublingly, it might include enslaved persons, whether those sold into enforced labour in plantation economies,

or wives who, as Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman* reflects, are ‘as much man’s property as his horse, or his ass’.³

Domestic property in particular looms large in political economy’s imaginary, so that property’s primary, ur-form often appears to be the hut, cottage, cabin, or house.⁴ The conjectural history offered in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755), for instance, identifies the ‘age of the cabins’, or the move from a nomadic, solitary, savage state to that of social settlements, as crucial in tipping natural man into modernity’s property order, a moment as formative for humankind’s moral character and affective behaviour as it is for its political organisation. From another perspective, domestic property, and the comfort and convenience which it might offer, does important rhetorical work in exemplifying the gains of commercial society, by contrast with a ‘savage’ state, in Adam Smith’s comparison of the ‘accommodation of the most common artificer or day-labourer’ and the domestic arrangements of ‘many an African king’, at the end of the first chapter of his *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).⁵ As these two examples show, from the foremost critic of commercial modernity and its most sophisticated theorist, the figure of property, especially in its domestic form, encapsulates and condenses some of the ambivalences and difficulties at the heart of late eighteenth-century commercial modernity. Not least among these are property’s association, even among thinkers (including Rousseau and Wollstonecraft) who acknowledge the ‘sacred right to property’, with some of the most troubling and seemingly unavoidable, even necessary features of contemporary human behaviour. This chapter explores how all of this is in play when Wollstonecraft pays attention, as she so often does, to property and the behaviours and sentiments it prompts, and it suggests that it is through what might be termed her ‘property imaginary’ that she both critiques the contemporary political economic order and tries to imagine an alternative to it.⁶

These preoccupations are already present in Wollstonecraft’s contemplation of the silent and empty Versailles, monument to the property and political order of the pre-Revolutionary age. The topos of the decline of court and monarchical power, and the property organisation with which it is associated, returns in the final chapter of the *View*, where Wollstonecraft elaborates how changing political structures will in turn produce geosocial transformation. Should ‘a republican government be consolidated’, she suggests, Paris itself will ‘rapidly crumble into decay’, as its ‘rise and splendour’ are owing ‘chiefly, if not entirely, to the old system of government’; meanwhile, ‘as the charms of solitary reflection and agricultural

recreations are felt, the people, by leaving the villages and cities, will give a new complexion to the face of the country – and we may then look for a turn of mind more solid, principles more fixed, and a conduct more consistent and virtuous'.⁷ It is clear that the abandoned Versailles in the earlier passage stands synecdochically for the collapse not just of the royal court, but of a whole political and economic order, and the forms of living, from cities through to lifestyles, behaviours and morals, which it sustained. In anticipating a 'new order of things' which will follow, Wollstonecraft shares with many thinkers of her time a sense that, after a long century of warfare in Europe and beyond, political and economic structures must be reorganised to enable a more peaceful, perhaps more equitable and virtuous society. Alongside the 'pity' prompted at Versailles then, 'a conduct more ... virtuous' must also be rescued from the collapsed and abandoned structures of monarchical corruption and luxury.

The scene at Versailles stages the end of one form of political order by placing the solitary 'pensive wanderer' in stark relief against its ruin. Anticipating the crumbling of Paris into decay, Wollstonecraft suggests that 'it is not likely that the departing structure will ever again rest securely on it's (*sic*) basis' but the rifts or schisms depicted at Versailles pertain not to the building but to the visitor, who is presented less as a unified self than as dismembered into fragmented parts: the 'solitary foot' which mounts the stair; the 'eye' which 'traverses the void'; the 'fleeting shadow' briefly visible in the 'long glasses' on the walls; the 'bosom' which receives a 'melancholy moral' from the 'frozen lesson of experience'; the 'breath' clogged by the 'chill' air; the 'oppressed heart' which 'seeks relief in the garden'.⁸ Although the 'dampness of destruction' properly belongs to the building, it is as though it is the self, recipient of the 'frozen lesson of experience', who is required to rescue and reconstitute itself. The same recovery of the desolate, outcast self, returned to its constituent, pre-social parts following, in its case, rejection by the society it inhabits, is narrated in Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), with which Wollstonecraft's *Short Residence* was deeply influenced, and which explores similar themes of exile, isolation, abandonment and (perhaps partial) self-recovery. If Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* analysed the failings of eighteenth-century commercial society through a conjectural history of progress in which the origin of property marked the fall of the human character in modernity, so Wollstonecraft's Versailles scene sketches the reverse: the end of one instantiation of political-economic order, symbolised by the palace, and the end, too, of the particular constitution of human personhood and community which it required and sustained. The crucial

question is what remains and what will follow it. In the *View*'s final chapter, Wollstonecraft anticipates the arrival of a 'new order of things', but the implication of *A Short Residence* is that any such rebuilding pertains less to property forms than to the individual self and her relation with the larger social whole, a recasting which will come at the cost of the self's near-dissolution. As this chapter will show, a journey which begins in the empty palace of Versailles thus continues in the forests, roads, and settlements described in *A Short Residence*, where Wollstonecraft continues to grapple with alternative possible futures for commercial modernity, as well as the question of her relation to it.

Domestic Property in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy

Smith's comparison of the 'accommodation' of the labourer with that of 'many an African king', in the opening chapter of *Wealth of Nations*, is just one of many instances in which the domestic house, its comforts and conveniences, figure in the argument and imaginary of eighteenth-century political economic writing. In this particular example, Smith evokes the difference between the living standards of the poor European worker and that of 'many an African king' to make a very particular defence of commercial modernity: not that it provides equally for all, nor that it is without its poor, but that it offers them better material living conditions than a pre- or non-commercial society can provide, even for (as he suspects, in a moment of anthropological fantasy) the African 'king'.⁹ The economic system that his work will go on to describe is thus defended from the outset on the grounds of material, domestic provision, including in part the domestic 'conveniences' which, for Rousseau in the *Discourse on Inequality*, are the focus of marked invective, described as 'hardly necessary' and even as the cause of mankind's 'degeneration'.¹⁰ The tendency of Smithian political economy towards abstractions (including value, wealth, labour, and circulation) often pulls it away from consideration of the concrete particularities to which it attends at the start of *Wealth* (details evoked include the labourer's coat, his linen shirt, his kitchen utensils, furniture and even his glass window); but nevertheless, the household and its various objects remain in Smith's rhetorical toolkit and are deployed periodically in his writing, as we shall see.

The presence of the house at the outset of *The Wealth of Nations* is a reminder of the domestic origins of political economy itself, in the knowledge of household management. Rousseau's article on 'Economy' for the *Encyclopedie* (also published in 1755 as his *Discourse on Political Economy*)

states that the word 'Economy' derived from the Greek *oikos* for 'house', and *nomos*, for 'law', the term later being extended to refer to the government of the state, and distinguished, as 'political economy', from 'private or domestic economy'. Although Rousseau states that 'there will always be an enormous difference between domestic government ... and civil government', he makes repeated use of a comparison between the two in his discussion.¹¹ Rousseau's article predates the emergence of physiocracy by the so-called 'economists' in the 1760s, usually identified as the origin of modern political economy, but nevertheless an idealised image of the household at Clarens, in *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) provided a focus for what Céline Spector has suggested is Rousseau's alternative political economy, with its agricultural self-sufficiency and natural abundance creating the conditions for moral virtue and social harmony.¹² Rousseau's commitment to viewing economic provision and the material conditions of life through the lens of the household could be seen as a resistance to the more abstracting tendencies of other political economic visions, as it ensures that human well-being and comfort are kept centre stage, whilst wealth is defined not in monetary terms but as a surplus of resources over needs.¹³ In Rousseau's political economy, the household, as both a unit of material provision and a moral and social community, signals an acceptance of the institution of private property but mitigates its frequent effects in generating inequality, inaugurating rank, and separating the classes. Wollstonecraft's interest in the household and its associated social formations, in both the *View* and *Short Residence*, can arguably also be read from this perspective. Like Rousseau, who uses letters from Julie's former tutor, Saint-Preux, to describe the Clarens 'domain', Wollstonecraft also chooses the epistolary mode to present her observations of household economies in *Short Residence*: a form which, since Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), had long been used to address the nature and organisation of European society.¹⁴ Like Montesquieu, whose work Wollstonecraft knew and admired, *Short Residence* uses the letters of an outsider to comment on social organisation and customs in countries foreign to the traveller.¹⁵ Where the *Persian Letters* include story, fable, anecdote, and observation, and Saint-Preux's letters on Clarens are largely descriptive however, Wollstonecraft adapts the epistolary form to give space to individual experience and the lyric voice, thus placing subjective feeling alongside more impersonal observation and elevating happiness as an evaluative measure of what is seen.

In early eighteenth-century economic writing, the house is often used to address the question of wealth distribution, or what Bernard Mandeville, in *Fable of the Bees* (1714), provocatively describes as the 'public benefit'

of the 'private vice' of luxurious consumption. Mandeville's famous beehive is replaced in Alexander Pope's 'Epistle to Burlington' (1731), with the rich man's villa, expenditure on which, whilst an expression of his self-regard, nevertheless has unintended distributive benefits: hence the Mandevillean paradox of his 'Charitable Vanity'.¹⁶ The same idea, that the 'refinement' of 'conveniency' in the 'dress, ... table, ... houses and ... furniture' of the rich constitutes 'the only means that can correct the unequal distribution of property' is present in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789).¹⁷ In such writing, material domestic accoutrements become interpretable through the lens of what, by the late 1770s, is presented as the economic system. But even Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* used the household as an explanatory tool. Its illustration of the distinction between productive and unproductive labour, for instance, demotes the economic importance of the rich man at the heart of a luxurious household, who is waited on by a bevy of servants, by comparing him unfavourably to the capitalist investor: '[a] man grows rich by employing a multitude of manufacturers: He grows poor, by maintaining a multitude of menial servants'.¹⁸ As we saw in Chapter 2, the image of the rich householder did not disappear from political economic discourse, however: Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) redeployed the familiar argument about the economic role of the rich landowner to defend the monasteries from the National Assembly's predations. At the same time, as Donald Winch has noted, Burke's defence of the role of the idle rich in maintaining the 'great wheel' of circulation 'strategically dropped' Smith's important distinction between productive and unproductive labour in order to defend wealthy establishments.¹⁹ Despite its strategic evasions, Burke's argument no doubt gained weight by drawing on the century-long deployment of the rich household as the primary example of the providential organisation of the relationship between wealth and poverty, and thus too of social and economic order.

Domestic property also played a role in the visual spectacle of modern commercial society. For both Rousseau and Smith, the visual economy of property – the way it is at the heart of the acts of looking, and of being looked at – is fundamental to the forming and shaping of human nature in commercial modernity, especially in terms of its moral and behavioural consequences. Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* offers a conjectural history of a shift from a pre-social, solitary, state in which 'savage man' led a 'roving, vagabond' life with no 'huts, houses, property of any kind' to the 'age of cabins', in which huts are built, families begin to live together, and property is instituted, together with familial affection, social bonds, and sexual

difference.²⁰ Not only do men at this point start acquiring conveniences, 'the first yoke they unwittingly imposed on themselves', but '[e]ach person began to gaze on the others and to want to be gazed on himself'. The formation of judgements of value, beauty, and importance leads to the desire for 'public esteem', a 'burning desire to be talked about' and 'greed for distinction'.²¹ Here for Rousseau is the crucial feature of the human character under modernity's property order: a dependence on the judgement and opinion of others which means that '[i]t was soon to one's advantage to be other than one actually was. Being and appearing became two quite different things'; thus 'everything is reduced to appearances, everything comes to be sham and put on – honour and friendship, virtue'.²² Thus, whilst the 'savage lives within himself; the social man, outside himself, lives only in the opinion of others and it is, so to speak, from their judgement alone that he gets the sense of his own existence'; '[a]ll these evils are the first effects of property'.²³ It is an account which shows, as Rousseau concludes, how 'the soul and the human passions change their nature' and how a society of sham, façade, and artifice arises inexorably from the first institution of property.²⁴ Thus, for Rousseau, one central problem of property society is what Spector terms its proliferating 'pathologies of recognition'.²⁵ Smith's account of how the rich man – his example is Louis XIV – sits at the heart of a social network of gazes of admiration, which Wollstonecraft adapted to describe women's objectified status as objects of male attention in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, owes much to Rousseau's analysis. With their identities dependent on and constructed through the gazes of others – caught, in Wollstonecraft's analysis, in a web of desire, vanity, and self-regard – women thus exemplify the problematic of identity in the visual economy of modernity's property order.²⁶

Rousseau also informs the story of the poor man's son in Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, who, as we saw in Chapter 3, so admires the 'condition of the rich' and their conveniences that he 'finds the cottage of his father too small for his accommodation, and fancies he should be lodged more at his ease in a palace'.²⁷ This 'fancy' is soon revealed to be a drive powerful enough to sustain the poor man's son's lifetime of labour; generalised as a principle of human nature, it is shown to stimulate and sustain all economic activity in general. Smith's account of the poor man's son's life of labour echoes Rousseau's description, at the end of the *Discourse*, of the 'ever-busy civilized man', who, in contrast to the 'peace and freedom' of the 'savage', 'sweats, scurries about, and constantly frets in search of ever more laborious occupations; he toils until death, and even hastens toward his grave in getting ready to live'. Like Smith's poor

man's son, he 'pays court to great men he loathes and rich men he holds in contempt; he spares nothing to gain the honour of serving them'.²⁸ But where for Rousseau, the contrast between 'savage' and 'civilized man' illustrates the loss of freedom, inequality, and corruption entailed by property, Smith's account recoups the benefits of the 'deception' of nature which, causing us to be 'charmed with the beauty of the accommodation which reigns in the palaces and oeconomy of the great', 'rouses and keeps in motion the industry of mankind'.²⁹ Whilst Rousseau and Smith agree that the visual presence of property in modernity strongly influences human behaviour, Smith suggests that what, at an individual level, is a tragic 'fall' into the deceptive lure of property offers larger benefits in building and sustaining the human civilisation which is able to clothe, house, and feed its members.

Smith also differs from Rousseau in the precise nature of the affect which for him is prompted by looking at the property of others. If, in Rousseau, the onlooker is precipitated into a tsunami of feeling, involving vanity, self-regard, and the desire for the esteem of others, Smith identifies what he claimed was a love of the beauty of the machinery or system which delivers convenience as, he states, underlying our response to the possessions of the rich. This principle, on which he placed great weight, as ultimately stimulating all economic activity and civilisational growth, is presented explicitly in terms of an affective response to domestic property, in the first three examples with which Smith illustrates it. 'When we visit the palaces of the great', he asserts, 'we cannot help conceiving the satisfaction we should enjoy if we ourselves were the masters, and were possessed of so much artful and ingeniously contrived accommodation' he asserts.³⁰ Refining on Hume, who had suggested that it was the 'utility' provided by such arrangements that pleased us, Smith suggests that it is not the 'very end' delivered by it, but 'the exact adjustment of the means for attaining' that convenience which ultimately moves us: the beauty and 'fitness' of the arrangement of things which will deliver it. That this is an aesthetic sentiment, an appreciation of a very particular species of beauty, is shown by invoking (again) the example of the house: '[t]he convenience of a house gives pleasure to the spectator' just as much, he says, as 'its regularity'.³¹ And the principle is illustrated with a further domestic example of disordered chairs, previously discussed in Chapter 3. Entering a room to find its chairs disordered, a person will go to the labour of arranging them properly, against the wall, to gain the 'convenience' of leaving the floor 'free and disengaged', before sitting down on one of them, a tale which for Smith illustrates the labour which we will undertake to gain 'that arrangement

of things' which 'promotes' convenience, rather than the resulting convenience (sitting on a chair) itself.³² So convinced is Smith of the power of our appreciation of the 'arrangement of things' which delivers convenience that, later on in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he suggests that those who advise their nation's legislators should describe 'the great system' by which 'all the wheels of the machine of government' might enable its subjects to be 'better lodged ... better clothed ... [and] better fed', rather than simply invoking that endpoint in itself, which 'will commonly make no great impression'.³³ Seemingly, the aesthetic appeal of an abstracted system is more compelling than the practical necessity of providing for material needs.

At work in the first two instances of Smith's exposition of our love of convenience is a principle central to the larger edifice of Smith's moral theory: sympathy. Thus, our capacity to 'enter by sympathy into the sentiments of the master' enables us to take vicarious pleasure in the objects and houses which he owns.³⁴ And it is through this capacity for sympathy with others that Smith seeks to reform and reconfigure the visual economy of commercial society as set out by Rousseau; to rewrite the inevitable network of mutual evaluative looks which exist between social subjects from what in Rousseau are, in Spector's description, varieties of 'pathology' to a morally beneficially operation. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* sets out the process through which, by looking at others, judging their behaviour, but also and reciprocally, perceiving their moral judgements of our behaviour, a complex economy of visual exchange between social actors establishes moral judgement, standards, and values. Although socially formed, these are internalised through the development of an interior 'impartial spectator'; individual moral self-consciousness, the moral 'self', is thus constructed through dialogic visual exchange of sentiments. Smith worried, however, that our propensity to admire the rich threatened to skew the carefully balanced moral geometry of society's visual field, a tendency which he attempted to address in revisions to the last edition of the *Theory* in 1790.³⁵ Given the importance placed on the act of looking at others in Smith's moral theory and understanding ourselves in turn as objects for their gaze, the implications of this prejudice in favour of the rich are serious: a corruption of the very moral sentiments by which he hoped the more rebarbative passions of commercial society might be restrained. Rousseau's troubling analysis of the effects of property on human behaviour, morality, and community – on the human personality itself – risked remaining unanswered.

As Michael McKeon notes, Smith deploys a metaphor of domestication to describe the process of 'bringing home' to ourselves the sentiments of others.³⁶ Indeed, Smith's metaphor leads him to describe this process as one

which figures our social peers themselves as the very objects, the domestic conveniences, that the poor man might admire in the houses of the rich, for other people become mirrors, the 'only looking-glass by which we can ... scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct'.³⁷ The 'bringing home' to our private selves – the domestication – of the publically available sentiments of others also reverses the move from the domestic to the public, which is embedded in the term 'political economy'. As McKeon observes, such comparison of personal sentiments with those of others to arrive at moral judgement is the corollary, in the field of moral or social psychology, of the role of the market in establishing value in the field of economic exchange.³⁸ Thus, both the psychology described in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and political economy itself are means of 'reconciling individual and society, particular and general', terms reconciled too in the various iterations of the image of the household whose history we have been tracing.³⁹ The much-celebrated capacity of the house to mediate distributively between individual and society, between rich men's desires and the lives of poor dependents, is thus part of the genealogy or prehistory of political economy's figure of the market, although political economy's preferred image for such a function became that of the invisible hand. To think about the household, and the relations it embodies and symbolises, as Wollstonecraft does, is thus also to open up such terms, and such relations, between individuals and the social whole, anew; potentially even to turn them inside out, as in Rousseau's staging of a resistance to political economy through a return, in his account of Clarens, to the economy of the household.

Unlike many other eighteenth-century women writers, Wollstonecraft did not write a novel centred on the domestic household, but the trace of these debates, and the imagery of houses and other forms of domestic property in which they are articulated, is nevertheless present in her non-fictional writing, as the remainder of this chapter explores. The absence, in Wollstonecraft's oeuvre, of a domestic novel may be significant: the familial household is most likely in her writing to be a space of oppression and neglect, as it is for the eponymous protagonist in the early novel *Mary*, or of sexual abuse, as it is for Jemima in *The Wrongs of Woman*. Indeed, in Wollstonecraft's fiction, the house and the family group it contains figure most often as that from which to escape, as it is for Mary, who flees to nature, to Ann, and then to Portugal; for Maria, who seeks to escape both her family of origin and, later, her disastrous marriage to Venables; for Jemima the jailor, whose stony-faced appearance signals the repression of all the affective sentiments supposedly fostered in the family unit of the house. The short-lived household that Maria and Darnford set up temporarily

following their escape from prison is no more successful as a solution to the 'wrongs' of women, although critics are often more optimistic about the all-female household, of Maria, her daughter, and Jemima, as signalled in one of the possible endings of this unfinished novel. Wollstonecraft is alert, too, to the consequences for women of the status of the family property as inheritable, or not, by them: the initial neglect of Mary follows directly from her exclusion from the line of inheritance, during the lifetime of her brother, just as much as her coercion into a loveless marriage to secure the family property after her brother's death, is a consequence of her new legal identity as heiress. In neither situation, it is clear, does property equate with happiness for women. The woman who conforms most obediently to the female role in this property order, Mary's mother Eliza, is reduced to a 'machine', a 'nothing', neglectful of her daughter whilst lavishing affection on her dogs, passive in the face of her husband's infidelity, and brought eventually to a death-bed at which she locks her daughter into the same fate by marrying her to a neighbouring property owner's son, in a chilling conjunction of marriage and female death.⁴⁰ As we have seen, on her visit to the desolate Versailles, Wollstonecraft fails to see herself reflected in the 'long glasses' still hanging on the palace walls, which show only her 'fleeting shadow', an uncanny non-reflection which speaks to the impossibility of her measuring, as Smithian moral theory would invite her, the relationship between self and the social order represented by Versailles. In Smith's theory, the 'bringing home' to ourselves of the sentiments of others can take place even in their absence, through the work of the imagination, even in the limit case of sympathy with the dead. The Versailles scene, turning as it does on the possibility, and pathos, of imagining the lives of those who were there and are now absent, invites consideration through precisely such a Smithian lens, yet its reflective mirrors don't work, and Wollstonecraft's visitor remains unseen. Women's place, the possibility of their identity or selfhood, in the existing property order, Wollstonecraft seems to suggest, lies somewhere between these two gothic, impossible choices: the deathly lock of the marriage ring or the non-identity of the ghostly shadow, reflecting only a fleeting escape which struggles to find substantial form.

The Critique of Convenience: Domesticity, the 'Art of Living', and Comfort

Wollstonecraft's fiction continues a critique of the implications for women of the property order of commercial society, which, as Chapter 3 showed, her second *Vindication* had already got well under way. We return to her

fiction again in Chapter 6. But another version of that critique, which is often worked out through Wollstonecraft's observations on the physical manifestation of property – in buildings of various kinds, and their inhabitants and manners – is present in her non-fictional writing, especially her *View of the French Revolution* and her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. Wandering around the empty Versailles, the Wollstonecraftian persona in the former work experiences not a Smithian sympathy with the sentiments of those who would once have enjoyed its conveniences, but the more unexpected feeling of pity, a sentiment which for Rousseau is felt by 'natural' man, and so precedes the social order of commercial modernity. Here, perhaps, is a sign of Wollstonecraft's desire to escape a Smithian narrative of inevitable sympathy with the sentiments of property owners, a story to which the aspirational desires and motivation of labour in political economy are so closely tied. The 'charm' once presented by the 'abode of magnificence' is 'broken'; her 'pity' thus signals a critique of the values and attitudes embodied in political economy's existing property order. It is quickly followed, too, by a vision of an alternative form of social organisation which 'nature' presents to the imagination: farms and hospitable homes, for industry and 'gladness', benevolence, and 'innocent pleasures', a vision which was shared by many of Wollstonecraft's radical fellow thinkers.⁴¹ This movement, between recognition of the failings of what exists, and visions, occasionally realised, of what might be, recurs repeatedly too, on Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian travels, as described in *Short Residence*.

One of the hopeful signs of progress mentioned by Wollstonecraft in the *View*'s final chapter, among the general 'advancement of science and reason', is the emergence of 'original compositions' in Germany which employ the judgement to 'estimate the value of things'.⁴² Repeatedly for Wollstonecraft, property stages the question of value: of how to value, of what is valued, of conflicting forms of value. In *Wealth of Nations*, the bible of how value-as-wealth is generated through labour, Smith finds space to concede the worth of a lesser form of value, art, and ornament, exemplified through the noble house: 'Noble palaces, magnificent villas, great collections of books, statues, pictures, and other curiosities, are frequently both an ornament and an honour, not only to the neighbourhood, but to the whole country to which they belong. Versailles is an ornament and honour to France, Stowe and Wilton to England'.⁴³ Whilst acknowledged, however, such values are clearly subsidiary to Smith's focus on the main business of generating national wealth. Like Smith, for whom the regularity of a building, as well as its 'conveniency', was part of its beauty,

Wollstonecraft can also appreciate symmetry in buildings as a touchstone for beauty.⁴⁴ Her *Hints* for an unwritten further volume of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* note that ‘Grecian buildings are graceful – they fill the mind with all those pleasing emotions, which elegance and beauty never fail to excite in a cultivated mind – utility and grace strike us in unison – the mind is satisfied – things appear just what they ought to be: a calm satisfaction is felt’.⁴⁵

In Smith, the aesthetic value of the beauty of a noble house receives only a passing nod en route to the larger project of establishing value via the market. In Wollstonecraft, by contrast, aesthetic judgement is deployed to discriminate between what is and isn’t pleasing in built properties, and thereby to critique the physical manifestations of political economy’s own valoration of convenience. If, in Smith, convenience is ultimately an aesthetic quality, pulling on the passions to motivate labour, Wollstonecraft flips this, offering a critique on the aesthetic grounds of the world that convenience has built. Thus, exploring, in *Short Residence*, two noble houses near Gothenburg, Wollstonecraft is ‘delighted’ with ‘the hand of taste’ evident in the ‘improved land’ of the first, but condemns the ‘abortions of vanity’ embodied by the second, whilst conceding, in conventional style, how its construction would have beneficially employed and ‘improved’ the local labourers.⁴⁶ In Christiana, however, Wollstonecraft finds the ‘[l]arge square wooden houses offend the eye’, combining size with ‘poverty of conception’ which ‘only a commercial spirit could give’. She links them to what she calls the ‘absurd ... argument of convenience’, which she criticises for the poverty of its conception: ‘Who would labour for wealth, if it were to procure nothing but conveniencies?’⁴⁷ The way in which the Christiana houses make visible the values of Smithian political economy founded on convenience enables Wollstonecraft to critique its inadequacies precisely via the ugliness of its material manifestation: the houses embody the rebarbative and reductive values of the pursuit of wealth. This mobilisation of aesthetic critique is not only a rejection of a culture of wealth and property manifested in desirable buildings but also a refusal of the possibility, theorised by Smith, of sympathetic identification with the possessions of the rich. Rather than demoting the question of beauty then, it is by contrast elevated to critique that which seems to Wollstonecraft to embody all the ills of a political economy of ‘convenience’. Wollstonecraft’s commitment to material beauty, to sensory pleasure and taste, thus counters the demotion of beauty to a lesser plane of value in political economic writing, or even to an invisible abstraction, as in the ‘great system’ of ‘all the wheels of the machine of government’ through an appeal to which Smith advised

that legislators might be brought to concern themselves in the interests of their country.⁴⁸ Whatever the beauty of that invisible system might be, Wollstonecraft makes clear that its material manifestation eschews any acknowledgement of the need for beauty, sidelining the human experience of pleasure, taste, and self-improvement. And if, as she says, the 'graces of architecture ... ought to keep pace with the refining manners of a people', the Christiana houses suggest that under the reign of 'commercial spirit', human nature itself suffers. As in the *View's* account of Versailles, an alternative vision is offered within the same letter, as Wollstonecraft recalls the 'very picturesque' cottages and farms she has seen in the remote Norwegian countryside, and relates accounts she has heard of the 'substantial farmers' of north Norway, whose 'independence and virtue' carry her 'back to the fables of the golden age': 'affluence without vice; cultivation of mind, without depravity of heart; with "ever smiling liberty"'. Although she admits she 'wants faith' in such scenes apparently 'sketched by a fairy pencil', the allure of a moderately prosperous, comfortable, and independent life, achieved away from the depravities and 'meanness' of commerce, is undoubtedly very real.⁴⁹

Wollstonecraft's quest for such alternative modes of existence was already under way in her *View of French Revolution*, where her attention to property, manners, and domestic habits was an integral part of her political economic analysis and critique. As she notes in a half-apology in that work's Advertisement, she has been unable to avoid 'entering into some desultory disquisitions' on 'descriptions of manners' which, although 'not strictly necessary to elucidate the events, are intimately connected with the main object'.⁵⁰ This analysis of French manners and character often proceeds through an attention to the domestic, even – perhaps especially – when that analysis points in two diametrically opposed directions. By and large, Wollstonecraft's account of the French is far from flattering. Because 'a variety of causes' have 'effeminated' their reason, the French 'may be considered as a nation of women', characterised in terms which recall her rebarbative description of the female sex in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.⁵¹ In that text, women are criticised for their failings in the domestic realm, where they amuse themselves with transient power play and trivial occupations, or else they flee from it to flit, 'helter-skelter' through London in their carriages.⁵² Similarly devoted to present pleasures, the French 'sport away their time' without any plan for the future, as 'transient gusts of feeling prevent their forming firm resolves of reason'.⁵³ Whilst they have refined the senses, their 'susceptibility of temper' leaves 'no time for reflection' or judgements;

their 'effusions of mind' are 'violent' but 'transitory', and benevolence evaporates in 'sudden gusts of sympathy'.⁵⁴ It is this association with the feminine, perhaps, which leads Wollstonecraft to express the national character through an unusual attention to the domestic interior: '[i]ndolently restless, they make the elegant furniture of their rooms, like their houses, voluptuously handy'.⁵⁵ If Smith's chairs are evidence of a willingness to defer pleasure and undertake labour to gain convenience, effort is short-circuited in Wollstonecraft's reading of the domestic scene, where accoutrements are always already degraded and luxurious. Not simply property, but even the organisation of domestic interiors, is a measure of character, and character weakness: a sign of restlessness, transient attention, and the voluptuous pursuit of pleasure.

This damning analysis does not apply to all those whom Wollstonecraft observed in France, however; there are a 'rational few', often living in the provinces rather than the capital, who have 'really learned the true art of living', a mode again expressed as a style of domestic living. It consists in 'giving that degree of elegance to domestic intercourse, which, prohibiting gross familiarity, alone can render permanent the family affections, whence all the social virtues spring'.⁵⁶ This domestic happiness consists in an affectionate 'urbanity of behaviour' in the family, civility and friendship between husband and wife, parents and children, and affability to servants; in mothers attending to the education of their children, in hospitable openness to neighbours, and in the leisurely pursuit of taste and knowledge. Such scenes, in which the different manners of women in particular are noted, recall Rousseau's depiction of the ideal community of Clarens; the 'gladness' which is 'spread ... around' recalls its brief glimpse in Wollstonecraft's vision in the Versailles gardens of an alternative social order. But Wollstonecraft's account of this 'art of living' gains a wider historical significance by appearing at the end of a mini-history of human progress from the 'savage state' to the arts, property, and warfare of modern times. With government ensuring 'the security of our persons and property', an alternative to an age of war should be found through the pursuit of domestic happiness, which Wollstonecraft thus casts as the proper expression or culmination of human society itself:

domestic felicity has given a mild lustre to human happiness superior to the false glory of sanguinary devastation, or magnificent robberies. Our fields and vineyards have thus gradually become the principal objects of our care – and it is from this general sentiment governing the opinion of the civilized part of the world, that we are enabled to contemplate, with some degree of certainty, the approaching age of peace.⁵⁷

In contrast with the analysis of the *Discourse on Inequality*, a book which Wollstonecraft nevertheless described as 'admirable', the rise of property does not have to be understood as giving inevitable rise to a society of vanity, aggression, competition, and selfishness; rather, the domestic offers an alternative sphere for the cultivation of human happiness and virtue, and alternative objects to be 'the principal objects of our care'.⁵⁸ The 'fields and vineyards' evoked here suggest that for Wollstonecraft, this is predominantly an agrarian, pastoral vision, an impression reinforced by the periodic assertion, in the *View*, of the superiority of living in the country – even on the land – to city living. This is a vision pursued in her next work, the *Short Residence*, where however it is also intercut with recurring anxieties about the potential stupor of country life. For the Wollstonecraft of the *View*, however, agrarian life offers a compelling alternative to the lifestyle and manners of commercial modernity, especially if domestic comfort, rather than luxurious and 'voluptuous' convenience, predominates.

Comfort, indeed, is one of the most important words in Wollstonecraft's political economic lexicon, which, whilst apparently innocuous and so easily overlooked, is deployed both in an analysis of the failings of the French *ancien régime*, and in an account of an ideal political economy. The 'comfort and independence of the people' is the 'most important end of society', she asserts; the 'comforts of life' are the 'just reward of industry' which should be attended to by legislators who should seek to secure and extend the 'comforts of its citizens'.⁵⁹ The 'duty' of the politician, indeed, is to 'not sacrifice any present comfort to a prospect of future perfection or happiness', and part of the tragedy of the French enthusiasm for revolution is that its rush for change threatens to 'destroy', instead of 'promoting ... the comfort of those unfortunate beings, who are under their dominion'.⁶⁰ Recognition of how 'intimately their own comfort was connected with that of others' is one of the markers of mankind's progression from a 'savage' to social state, and political understanding itself grows from 'the interest [man] takes in the business of his fellow-men' to 'the comfort, misery, and happiness of the nation to which he belongs'.⁶¹ The new 'science of politics and finance', whose early shoots Wollstonecraft welcomes, would appear to be a continuation or expression of that enquiry, measuring as it does the 'comforts', as well as the 'wants, maladies, ... happiness, and misery' of the people.⁶² The repeated deployment of the concept of 'comfort' in the chapter of *View* on political economic matters shows how central it is in Wollstonecraft's conception of such concerns. Necker's vague plans on the deficit are condemned as pernicious to both public credit and 'private

comfort', and a discussion of currency notes that precious metals, whilst used as the standard measure of value, are 'necessary to our comfort' whilst paper money risks rising prices and so 'all the comforts of life, will bear a higher price'.⁶³ Elsewhere, pre-revolutionary taxes and customs are criticised for causing people to live hand to mouth, unable and unencouraged, to 'store up comforts' for the future.⁶⁴ It is clear that the consequences for the 'comfort' of the people – as opposed, say, to the wealth of the nation – are the gauge against which political economic actions should be measured.

A political economic vocabulary founded on comfort is also connected to a critique of the existing mode of 'civilization', where wealth has become 'more desirable than either talents or virtue', where 'inequality' reigns, and the rich 'tyrannize' over the poor.⁶⁵ In France, this proper focus on comforts has been disrupted, in part by a skewed economic development which focuses on the luxury of the upper classes, serving which makes 'machines' of the lower classes:

Whilst pleasure was the sole object of living among the higher orders of society, it was the business of the lower to give life to their joys, and convenience to their luxury. This cast-like division, by destroying all strength of character in the former, and debasing the latter to machines, taught frenchmen (*sic*) to be more ingenious in their contrivances for pleasure and show, than the men of any other country; whilst, with respect to the abridgment of labour in the mechanic arts, or to promote the comfort of common life, they were far behind.⁶⁶

Here, the pursuit of 'contrivances' for the wealthy – those which, in 'voluptuously handy' form, were earlier linked to the degeneracy of the effeminised urban rich – is explicitly opposed to the more proper object of 'the comforts of common life'. The 'aggrandisement' of courts has sacrificed 'the convenience and comfort of men' in favour of 'the ostentatious display of pomp and ridiculous pageantry'; extravagance rather than 'domestic virtue and happiness' has been practiced.⁶⁷ In a final, damning judgement, it is thus telling for Wollstonecraft that the French 'have no word in their vocabulary to express *comfort* – that state of existence, in which reason renders serene and useful the days, which passion would only cheat with flying dreams of happiness'. The French 'had never, in fact, acquired an idea of that independent, comfortable situation, in which contentment is sought rather than happiness; because the slaves of pleasure or power can be roused only by lively emotions and extravagant hopes'. Comfort is linked to a certain affective state, a contentment sometimes also called 'gladness', praise of which recurs in Wollstonecraft's writing. If at times it is sentimentalised and unattainably idealised, it nevertheless

contrasts with the more dubious pursuit of pleasure and voluptuous sensation associated with wealth and luxury.

From one perspective, Wollstonecraft's remarks here re-echo Rousseau's attack on a political economy focused on urban manufacturing at the expense of the agricultural countryside. In this respect, her valuation of 'comfort' had already been answered in Smith's demonstration that a political economy open to manufacture, trade, and foreign commerce was the best way of providing for the needs, and comforts, of a nation's population. A Rousseauian political economy, such as he outlines in his advice to Corsica, closed off from foreign trade, and with embargoes on luxury consumption, would jeopardise economic growth and risk stagnation and poverty.⁶⁸ But Wollstonecraft is looking beyond an economic argument to one about the effects of different economic lifestyles on the human personality and quality of life. At stake is the question of what kind of life we might lead, and what kind of person we might be able to be, in each economic regime. This was a problem she was not alone in addressing: Smith too shared these concerns, as did his fellow Scot Adam Ferguson, in his *Essay in the History of Civil Society* (1767). But if Smith suggested education as a counter to the mental atrophy of workers under the division of labour, and Ferguson looked to the militia to revive a martial spirit lacking in a modern commercial age, Wollstonecraft addressed the problem at root. It was our 'manner of living', she believed, 'the occupations and habits of life', as well as our education, which 'in a great measure' informs our 'energy of thinking'.⁶⁹ From this, it followed that it was from the acquisition of different habits and manners, attained through living differently, that some alternative to commercial society might be attained, and the potential of the human personality realised. The problem, of course, was that in the Enlightenment conjectural history which informed her thinking, manners were a function of an era's socioeconomic 'stage'; Wollstonecraft thus risked being caught in a vicious circle whereby commerce formed manners which constrained and inhibited the possibility of human improvement which depended in turn on a change of manners. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she had looked to a 'revolution' in female manners to break out of this bind, but the more thorough political revolution in France which she had just witnessed demonstrated the complexity of these problems. Whilst on the one hand, it clarified for her a vision of an alternative political, economic, and social settlement, centred on the alternative 'true art of living', on the other, it prompted her to advocate for gradual change as a surer way to achieve progress.

In the last paragraph of her *View*, Wollstonecraft evokes the ‘philosophical eye’ which ‘looks into the nature and weighs the consequences of human actions’: it alone will be able to ‘discern the cause’ of the tumultuous political events such as she has related.⁷⁰ It is a figure which draws directly on Smith’s own presentation of the privileged gaze of the philosopher, who, in a society governed by the division of labour, alone has the ‘leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people’. Smith recognised that the ‘acute and comprehensive’ understandings of such people would be of no larger social good unless ‘those few ... happen to be placed in some very particular situations’ where ‘their great abilities’ might contribute to ‘the good government or happiness of their society’.⁷¹ Such a position sounds by no means a foregone conclusion. These questions of the viewing subject, of his or her relation to society, and of the destination or reception of their insights are replayed in Wollstonecraft’s next work, which also investigates the very formation of subjects in the property order of modernity. It was perhaps by retracing the origin of the constitution of the human personality in the visual economy of property that some way out of history’s bind might be found.

Property in *A Short Residence*: Thoughts ‘Attached to the Idea of Home’

Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), despite being written soon after the *Historical View of the French Revolution*, is rarely considered alongside that work. *Short Residence* continues the earlier text’s interest in property and the habits of domesticity as measurable signs of socio-political organisation, but its attention to property is more complex. The material embodiment of comfort hailed in the *View* is frequently depicted as idealised and unattainable, and the advances of a corrupt commercial age – the ‘tyranny of wealth’ which commands, everywhere, ‘too much respect’ – are more clearly depicted.⁷² Where *View* offered occasional bursts of optimism founded on a more-or-less sustained faith in gradual improvement through rational enlightenment, *Short Residence* offers an ongoing battle with a melancholic perception of human society in the commercial age, leavened by moments of sublime transcendence or visions of beauty. It is these, rather than a route forward to progress through education and enlightenment, which offer periodic, if temporary, promises of release from the conditions and constraints of the historical moment. In *Short Residence*, the historical problem of commercial modernity, of which property is a

visible sign, thus proves to be intertwined with questions of the self: of human formation, of the human personality, and especially of its capacities for self-transcendence; meanwhile literary form emerges as an alternative property mode through which such questions can be framed, and the narrative of selfhood in the commercial age might be recast.

We have already seen how Wollstonecraft critiques a culture of wealth which is embodied in the material assets of buildings: both those, like the houses of Christiana, which illustrate the ugliness of political economy's principle of convenience, and those, like Versailles, which embody the property order's culture of display. Where alternative values are sketched, these are associated with comfort, domesticity, independence, and sufficiency. The 'straight road of observation' of Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian travels enables her to attend to innumerable variants of the home, read as signs of 'the increasing ... happiness of the kingdoms' through which she passes.⁷³ From her first letter, thoughts 'attached to the idea of home' are 'mingled with reflections respecting the state of society I had been contemplating'; the domestic properties associated with such reflections include the 'wretched hut' and the comfortable farmhouse; the merchant's house near Gothenburg, the 'stupid kind of sadness' of the house of the Danish ambassador to London, and the empty palaces and mansions which symbolise a hoped-for decline of aristocratic and courtly power.⁷⁴ Each example offers its own instantiation of a mode of human existence, whether the 'true art of living' or otherwise.

As we saw in the previous section, Wollstonecraft can scarcely believe reports of the independent, virtuous farmers of north Norway, whose affluence, liberty, and 'cultivation of mind' take her back 'to the fables of the golden age'.⁷⁵ But she sees with her own eyes 'the sweetest picture of a harvest home I had ever beheld!': a 'little girl' mounted on a 'shaggy horse', her father walking at the side of the hay cart, carrying a child, and followed by a boy labouring with a fork to stop the harvested 'sheaves' from falling. Her 'eyes followed them to a cottage' and an 'involuntary sigh' whispers to her heart 'that I envied the mother'.⁷⁶ This 'sweetest picture' recalls similar cottage scenes viewed by Rousseau in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, with whose sentiments Wollstonecraft's text is deeply imbued. Stopping on his walks to watch village workers 'repairing their flails, or women in their doorways with their children', Rousseau reports that '[t]here was something about this sight that touched my heart'; like Wollstonecraft, 'I felt myself sighing', although unlike her it is 'without knowing why'.⁷⁷ For both writers, the affective tug of such scenes derives from their status as irredeemable outsiders: the attractions of cottage life lie

in part in its image of a wholesome social unit, the possibility of rectifying the alienation from the social body which both writers feel. But whereas Rousseau writes as a social outcast following the rejection of his writings by the authorities, what debars Wollstonecraft from participating in such scenes is at once both more personal and more structural. Certainly, her own 'babe' may 'never experience a father's care of tenderness', given her estrangement from Imlay, but equally the cottage mother, seen 'preparing their pottage', reminds Wollstonecraft how much she dislikes cooking. The alluring modesty and comfort of cottage domesticity, so akin to the rural 'arts of living' praised in *View*, runs intolerably, insufferably, against her personal taste, and perhaps something more. The double move, to and from the lure of such scenes, staged a number of times in *Short Residence*, marks a particular problem: of Wollstonecraft (or her persona) being at odds or out of step with her own time, and this is given an almost literal expression through the question of how or where she might house herself, of feeling homeless in relation to the different forms of home (for instance, the urban home or the rural cottage) which might be available to her.

Wollstonecraft and Rousseau were of course far from alone in the attraction they felt for the modest, cottage life. As I have explored in detail elsewhere, the cottage and its related image, of the farm or rural home-stead, sheltering virtuous, independent citizens in a society characterised by moderate wealth and relative equality, recurs in a particular tradition of mid-to-late eighteenth-century philosophical and economic thinking, a tradition with which Wollstonecraft was deeply engaged.⁷⁸ Richard Price's praise for the 'simple manners' of the 'independent and hardy yeomanry' of Connecticut in his *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* (1784) evidenced his belief that the 'happiest state of man is the middle state between the savage and the refined ... between the wild and the luxurious', and Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) offered a beguiling picture of an American landscape characterised by a 'pleasing uniformity of decent competence', so different from a Europe where the 'hostile castle and the haughty mansion' contrasted with 'the clay-built hut and miserable cabin'.⁷⁹ Rousseau's *Social Contract* linked equality with moderation and suggested that the ideal state for humanity was moderate wealth, gentle government, simple manners, and commerce serving happiness. In the mid-1790s, the cottage was everywhere in literary culture: for Johnson's *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft herself reviewed (with characteristic acerbity) *The Cottage of Friendship, Juliet: or, The Cottager*, and *Christmas in a Cottage*; her review of Brissot's American travels mentions the neat cottages which contribute to the 'smiling aspect'

of 'industry and content' in the 'solitary wilds' between Boston and New York.⁸⁰ This omnipresence, sign of an unresolved cultural yearning, marked the difficulty of realising the vision of comfortable sufficiency that Price and Crèvecoeur had articulated. As Gregory Claeys has observed, the desire for a virtuous, simple, egalitarian society, often associated with an agricultural basis, was for many at odds with the pull of cultural progress, associated with commercial society, its refinements, and arts, a quandary expressed in *Short Residence's* oscillation between the competing attractions of country and city.⁸¹ Ultimately, however, for Wollstonecraft, a return to the cottage threatened indolence, stupidity, and torpor for the modern self. Stupidity – becoming, in the words of Smith himself, 'as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become' – was also recognised as the fate of the labouring poor under the repetitive and mindless regime of the division of labour.⁸² To escape stupidity thus represented something of a historical problem, and a circular one. Wollstonecraft herself, despite her praise for Rousseau's 'admirable' *Discourse on Inequality*, refers sarcastically to his 'golden age of stupidity'; in *The Wrongs of Woman*, Darnford, reporting on his sojourn in America, describes how he built himself a house on the land in good settler style, but was driven from it by a longing for 'more elegant society, to hear what was passing in the world, and to do something better than vegetate with the animals'.⁸³ Much as she is drawn to the country, in the *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft associates it with the 'inertia of reason' and reflects a number of times on her need for the stimulation of city life, an urge clearly at odds with her distaste for the ugliness of Christiana, or, later, the devotion to money-making she finds in Hamburg.⁸⁴

The ideal of the cottage thus marked a historical problem: what it means to inhabit commercial society and what must be left behind. Such leaving behind of the simple country life is the foundational story of the stadial history through which Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries understood commercial modernity. Montesquieu's parable of the Troglodytes, in his hugely influential *Persian Letters*, suggested that the virtuous agricultural stage of early human history inevitably gave way to alternative forms in the face of humankind's desire for wealth and political hierarchy; Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* also offered a powerful account of humanity's tragic but inevitable fall into property and modernity.⁸⁵ Even Smith acknowledged our 'predilection' for the 'charms' of country life whilst arguing that specialisation and the division of labour better enabled market society to provide for the needs of the people.⁸⁶ But Wollstonecraft's return to commercial society's primal scene offers a significant variation on these

founding myths. For her, there is no return to an idealised pastoral existence not because of the irrefutable call of wealth, a competitive social vanity, or the pursuit of ever more refined material conveniences: rather it is because pastoral ‘inertia’ does not offer what is needed for the ‘improvement of the heart’ and the ‘understanding’.⁸⁷ The attraction of cottage life certainly marks a resistance to the promises and costs of progress and a yearning for a simpler existence – an expression of unease in relation to one’s contemporaneity, a temporal dislocation or disavowal which marks a feeling of homelessness within one’s current time. But to turn down the lure of the cottage, as Darnford and Wollstonecraft both do, voices a conviction about the needs, and potential improvement, of the human subject in modernity. The unattainability of the cottage life is thus the impossibility of ceasing to be a modern subject: to be suddenly content stirring pottage, or vegetating with the animals; to no longer require the mental stimulation of taste, thought, and educated company. The dilemma, of course, is that such requirements are associated with the very embodiment of commercial modernity, the ‘elegant’ world of the city, whose attractions might also shade into more voluptuous or degraded ones. To address all this, in *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft reconsiders the individual’s relation to her history, to explore how the resources of modern subjectivity and interiority, of taste and feeling, might be brought to bear on the problem of such dislocated inhabiting of one’s time. Also involved, given the centrality of property in accounts of modernity, is a reconsideration of property’s role in forming the human person – of individuation through property – and a reformulation of the relation of the individual to the social whole. The problem of how to inhabit one’s time thus involves dismantling a story which yokes the modern self to property, and articulating an alternative account founded on the possibility of ‘improvement of the heart’ and ‘understanding’ which is at odds with political economy’s narrative of the self in commercial modernity. It is this that the conditions of displacement of her Scandinavian travels enable Wollstonecraft to consider.

Individuation and Sympathy in *A Short Residence*

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Rousseau and Smith both link the institution of property with the emergence of society: with affective and social bonds, community formation, and ultimately law and government. At the same time, for both property is also associated with individuation: with the emergence of self-consciousness and a sense of individual difference from others. Rousseau’s conjectural narrative describes the shift

from the 'savage' state to modernity as marked by the emergence of self-awareness: the savage who lives in a solitary state in an abundant nature has no need of others, and therefore 'lives in himself'; but the 'man of society' depends on others, desires their gaze and approval, and so lives 'out of himself'. His self-recognition, dependent on recognition by others, is thus a state of self-alienation. In Smith's more benign account of the operation of the social gaze in property society, individual moral self-awareness is again achieved through receiving and assimilating the gazes of others, but Rousseau's account of a pressing need for the esteem of others, which can lead to vanity, competition, war, and revenge, is softened into a force for self-moderation and a desire for moral approval. For Smith, the 'natural man' who has not been in society has no sense of his moral self until he acquires this through reading in the faces of others how they are reacting to him. Both Smith and Rousseau offer conjectural accounts by which the contemporary social world, defined by modernity's property order, can be understood in contrast to a hypothesised alternative mode of human life which, it is postulated, may have preceded it. Their accounts of the individual subject, the modern self, are thus historical as well as conjectural: an explanation of the human personality as it appears in the property order of the commercial age.

These themes in Rousseau and Smith – the historical stages of human progress, marked by different property relations and forms of social organisation; the subjection of the individual to the gaze of others; the formation of social bonds and of self-alienation – are all present, and reworked in *A Short Residence*, which reworks too the story of the formation of the self in relation to property and the property order. From the outset, the text's narrating subject has a complex relation to the context of her historical formation: she is a fully-formed modern subject, a product of her time who enacts both philosophical observation and affective response, yet she is also separated, even alienated from her formative origins by virtue of a geographical displacement which appears to send her not only to another place, but to another historical time. In this text, the Wollstonecraftian persona is geographically but also, as it were, temporally displaced from modernity by what she understands as the rudimentary, even backward nature of the settlements she first encounters on landing in Sweden. First disembarking on Scandinavia's foreign shore, Wollstonecraft reports, is like arriving at the beginning of a new world, among men 'who remain so near the brute creation', where life seems 'congealed' at the 'source', and the inhabitants of a 'wretched hut' are '[s]carcely human' and nearly unintelligible.⁸⁸ The stage is set for a new mode of historical enquiry into human

society as, over the course of her travels, this temporally displaced subject repeatedly views, reviews, and even participates in numerous 'tableaus' (a word Rousseau deploys to describe the ideal domestic scene of Clarens in *Julie*) of domesticity of various kinds. Such household scenes, where differing manners and modes of domesticity are on display, enable her to continue to revolve the questions about manners and the 'art of living' which she has brought with her from France: to reflect on the situations of wives and daughters, the manners of men, the relations of masters and servants, husbands and wives, and the different lives and morals of farmers, sailors and merchants, the educated and the uneducated. But here, questions about the possible progress of human society, and the growth of commerce, are staged in a context where both the consequences of that growth and what preceded it can be seen, in a vision which sweeps from the 'broken spirit' and misery of wretched poverty of the peasants in Sweden, to the economic and material improvement promised in the 'grand proof' of human industry, to an anticipatory, and melancholic mourning for humankind in a future when such improvements have reached their furthest extent, and the planet can no longer support them.⁸⁹ Along the way, she warns against the 'tyranny of wealth', bemoans the narrow sentiments of money-getters, and measures the costs and gains of 'progress' through fancy, reflection, and reverie.

These concerns, whilst potentially abstract, are never staged in a purely theoretical way; rather they emerge experientially, through the reflections and observations of the narrator, whose interior experience and repeated absorptions in reverie are as much part of what is being depicted and explored in this text as the external world: self-reflection and social knowledge, self-experience and external experience, go hand in hand. The persistence of Wollstonecraft's inquiry into the different social forms of human existence represents a significant difference from Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, which nevertheless is an important intertext for her. Where *Reveries* stages Rousseau's withdrawal from the social world of human relations and celebrates his 'complete renunciation of the world' and 'great fondness for solitude', Wollstonecraft's travels represent a new mode of engagement with human society.⁹⁰ For Rousseau, who 'in the shade of a forest', seems to himself to be 'forgotten, free, and undisturbed, as if I no longer had any enemies', it is as though the retreat of the *Reveries* removes him from the problems of social life to the simpler forest existence akin to that of natural man. But if Rousseau seeks 'to escape as far as possible the memory of men', Wollstonecraft borrows from the inquiry into the self which Rousseau had modelled, but combines this with an

exploration of the nature and variable forms of human society itself, and the self's relation to it.⁹¹

Central to this exploration in *Short Residence* is the 'dialogic' exchange of the gaze which for both Rousseau and Smith forms social bonds and enables the individual to come into relation with society and to know him or herself. The text repeatedly puts this in play to revisit the story of the formation of the individual through self-consciousness in relation to others and the relation of that individual to the social order of modernity. Yet the play of this formative social gaze takes multiple forms or perspectives, to disturb and make more complex the story told by Rousseau and Smith. On the one hand, Wollstonecraft is, as it were, natural man, brought into society, recipient of the gazes of others, for whom she represents something not previously seen, as for those who are astonished to see a lone female traveller, or who comment that she asks '*men's questions*'.⁹² At the same time, Wollstonecraft is the consciously framed philosophical observer, travelling on the 'straight road of observation', attentive to 'my favourite subject of contemplation, the future improvement of the world', whilst also casting herself in the third person, as she admits at the outset, as 'the little hero of each tale'.⁹³ Thus, in *Short Residence*, the individual subject, divorced from society, set down in its ruins, as it were, at the start of the world, traces something of a reverse of the conjectural history of human progress offered in Smith or Rousseau: the modern subject, the spectator of others, instead of being produced through social interaction with her surroundings, is instead transposed back in time, to view with sympathy and feeling a range of different social establishments, and to judge them appropriately. This geo-temporal transposition recasts what is, precisely, hypothetical or theoretical in conjectural history or moral philosophy, so that any knowledge achieved is arrived at through the gaze of the sympathetic spectator, transposed back through time to different stages of human progress. If, for Smith, our judgements are formed by our social surroundings, and our values are formed by and shared with our peers, in *Short Residence*, travel, as both geographical and historical displacement, enables the transhistorical testing of the self and its relation to different social forms. Thus, one form of political economy might be measured against others (including political economy in Rousseau's deliberately retrograde sense of household management), and modern commercial society submitted to the tests of social judgement and moral sentiments, as well as of taste and feeling. At the same time, the self, undergoing the constant, receptive experience of travel and observation, reveals its multivalent capacity to absorb and assimilate, register, and test the import of what is

seen and felt, equally able to respond to the beauty of a young girl's face or the deathliness of Scandinavian pine forests, as to recall details of taxes and customs duties in the countries through which she travels.

The narrative persona's explorations and observations, measurements and reflections, are enacted through the text's characteristic movement, a restless oscillation between the interior self and the exterior world, between subjective experience and social judgement: a movement which echoes that of the sympathetic spectator described in Smith's moral theory. The philosophical 'eye' deployed by Wollstonecraft thus incorporates too the eye of the sympathetic onlooker: she is both an outside observer and a social participant, an object of other people's gaze. McKeon has described the continual exchange or crossing between self and world which is theorised in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as offering a form of knowledge which is also a social psychology and an ethics.⁹⁴ Wollstonecraft's philosophical understanding of the world and its 'future improvement' is thus a mode of knowledge which is social in two senses: it is arrived at by (in McKeon's words) a 'social dialectic' between subject and external world, and it understands the historicity and socially situated nature of the viewing subject. Similarly, the narratorial persona's interior landscapes and subjective experiences are repeatedly juxtaposed and intermingled with the external scenes through which she travels. The extent of this mixing transcends the 'social dialectic' of visual and affective exchange outlined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which enables not only social harmony but also 'self-knowledge: we know ourselves only as we sympathetically internalise the social other'.⁹⁵ In Smith's words, the self-knowledge acquired in this process is of 'the real littleness of ourselves', learned by 'introjecting' into ourselves the view of us that others have.⁹⁶ Smith thus explains how self-knowledge, the 'importance and difficulty' of which is commented on by Rousseau (perhaps surprisingly), in the Preface to *Discourse on Inequality*, might be acquired in commercial modernity.⁹⁷ The self-knowledge which Rousseau attempts in the *Reveries* (a text which he described as an appendix to the revolutionary experiment in self-knowledge of his *Confessions*) comes less via social dialectic and more via introspection, social withdrawal, and reverie.⁹⁸ Wollstonecraft's mode of self-knowledge in *Short Residence* has elements of both Rousseauian introspection and Smithian introjection. She repeatedly moves between inner and outer, from introversion to external engagement; her reveries or transports take place in the midst of her observations of different instantiations of human society, juxtaposing the Smithian subject's experience of the external world with a depiction of the interior realms such as those attended to by Rousseau's

solitary walker. Such moments of transport, too, often enact a movement of contemplation on the nature of the self and her relation with material externality, or with others – even, at times, when such preoccupations appear to have been abandoned. In the process, the Smithian story about the relationship of the self to the social order which forms him – the question of individuation – is both pursued and recast.

The presence of such concerns is announced from the very first letter, which stages a crisis in the relation of the self to the social whole, as Wollstonecraft lies awake reflecting ‘on the idea of home’ and ‘the state of society I had been contemplating that evening’, thoughts which prompt tears to fall onto the check of her sleeping daughter. ‘What ... is this active principle which keeps me awake?’ Wollstonecraft continues, ‘[w]hat are these imperious sympathies’ which ‘made me feel more alive than usual?’ Past moods of melancholy and misanthropy, she reflects, have caused her to consider ‘myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind ... alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself.’⁹⁹ As in Smith, sympathy is the foundational social bond, but here it is akin to a material principle, ‘involuntary’ and ‘imperious’, somehow greater than the subject whom it overcomes and whose mood it transforms, whose very limits and boundaries it rewrites. Similar reflections on his state of social exile appear in Rousseau’s first walk in the *Reveries*, but whilst, like Wollstonecraft, his ‘soul remains active’, his ‘heart has been stripped of all worldly affections’: no ‘involuntary’ sympathy arrives to reconnect ‘particle’ to the ‘grand mass’.¹⁰⁰ The pleasures of his still-persisting, still-active soul are staged a little later in the text, when Rousseau describes lying in a drifting boat, lost for ‘hours at a time’ in a ‘thousand vague but delightful reveries’, but ultimately the delight of such hours is the god-like happiness of self-sufficiency: ‘[w]hat does one enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to the self, nothing but oneself and one’s own existence: as long as this state lasts, one is self-sufficient like God. The feeling of existence stripped of all other affections is in itself a precious feeling of contentment and peace’.¹⁰¹ In Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, too, the boat will be a vehicle for arriving at a complex self-awareness, but when Wollstonecraft similarly drifts in a boat off the shore near Tonsberg, she experiences not the divine self-sufficiency of the self but both its fragility and a resistance to its finitude:

I cannot bear to think of being no more – of losing myself – though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organised dust – ready to fly

abroad the moment the spring snaps, or the spark goes out which kept it together. Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable, and life is more than a dream.¹⁰²

As in the early passage in Letter 1, the emotional stress experienced by the self only reinforces Wollstonecraft's sense of being more than she is: but where the earlier passage turned to a material image – the 'involuntary' force of adhesion – to relay the 'something more', here it is the inverse, a necessary assumption of something beyond the material life of 'organised dust'. The 'active, restless' turning from material to immaterial language marks a persistent urge to penetrate the mysteries of human existence: the nature of social bonds, the boundaries between self and others, a resistance to the merely material existence of the solitary self.

In this and similar moments, Wollstonecraft evokes and retreads a whole strand of eighteenth-century moral philosophy, into the nature of human subject and moral and social feeling, to which Smith and Rousseau had both contributed. But where Rousseau resolves such questions through retreat to the happiness of a solitary state, and Smith achieves social harmony through each individual learning his 'real littleness', Wollstonecraft allows her insistence on the 'something' more than isolated individualism to reverberate through her text, to sit alongside its larger questions about the purpose of human community, the destiny of 'progress', and the nature of commercial modernity itself. The same 'active, restless spirit', the persistent more-than-material 'something' will reject the beautiful inertia of cottage life and will be deployed to critique the 'chase after wealth' viewed in the merchants of Hamburg, where, in the 'strange machine' of human nature, the love of 'humanity' is sacrificed to self-interest and business.¹⁰³ If, as Michael Igantieff describes, market society is a 'society of strangers, of mediated and indirect social relations', where, famously, provision is made via the invisible hand of the market rather than the 'benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker', Wollstonecraft insists on the persistence of an alternative form of intersubjectivity, a social bond whose capaciousness does not proscribe a capacity for critique.¹⁰⁴ Sympathy, the inevitable 'attraction of adhesion', is notably withheld from the 'embruted' possessors of '[m]ushroom fortunes' derived from 'extensive' commercial speculations.¹⁰⁵

The social bond of sympathy, thrown into relief by such periodic crises in *Short Residence*, is far from being Wollstonecraft's innovation (and, as the text's few moments of irrecoverable despair bear witness, it is not always available, despite its apparently 'imperious' powers). The very first sentence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* asserted the self-evidence of

'some principles' in man's nature which, '[h]ow selfish soever' he may be supposed, 'interest him in the fortune of others'; the *Discourse on Inequality* claimed the existence of a sympathy-like '*amour propre*' between beings in the 'savage' state. In Smith and Rousseau, however, sympathy is tied to a story of the property order, or progression to it: Smith's claim of a fundamental social interest in human nature is the first step in a theory of social and moral cohesion which seeks to counter the divisive effects of a society founded on property ownership; in Rousseau, *amour propre* gives way to '*amour soi*', or self-love, with the institution of private property. That sympathy (usually, although not always) persists even in the context of Wollstonecraft's alienated and dislocated state, detached and removed from the context of her social formation, makes a powerful case for its existence not simply as a product of history, time, and culture but as transcendent, detached from such contexts. It is both residue, what remains of the self when detached from the context of its social formation, and also, importantly, what one always has: the 'honest sympathy of nature' is found even among the unexpectedly hospitable peasants of the pre-social wilds of the shores of Sweden.¹⁰⁶ In one sense, this confirms Smith's claim that it is a primary, natural instinct, but what in Smith is a necessary first supposition on which the whole apparatus of his theory is built is stated much more powerfully in Wollstonecraft, and allowed far more extensive range. *Short Residence* detaches the principle of sympathy and the whole apparatus of its operation from the specific context of commercial society and renders its reach and potential far more extensive, whilst at the same time mobilising it, where necessary (as with the critique of the principle of convenience signalled by the ugly Christiana houses), to oppose and counter the values on which commercial society is built. In so doing, the question of individuation, as well as of social connection, is radically detached from the context of property through which it has previously been understood.

Transcendent, transhistorical sympathy, which constitutes just one example of the affective powers of the individual subject explored in *A Short Residence*, thus enables a dismantling of the modern subject's relation to property. In Wollstonecraft's text, the modern subject is not produced through the property order but displaced from it; sympathy becomes free-wheeling and unfixed, a principle of social bond detached from social context, and human affection or 'adhesion' is freed from association with any particular mode of politico-social order. This radically cuts the genealogical connection by which existing accounts of human sentiment tie it to a story, in both Smith and Rousseau, of origin and progression, a

narrative in which the property order of modernity is destination. Smith's worry, addressed in his additions to the 1790 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that sympathy for the rich skewed the operation of the moral sentiments, makes manifest his attention to such contexts. By contrast, in *A Short Residence*, by virtue of Wollstonecraft's temporal and geographic displacement, sympathy transcends any material condition of its formation, underlined by its presence even at times of alienation or isolation which can verge on the suicidal, and in states of propertylessness, homelessness, and exile from human community. Equally, the imagination which in Smith mediates between inner and other, self and world, self-interest and social judgement, but often, in McKeon's words, works to internalise the 'public view', in Wollstonecraft instead enables the transcendence, in fleeting moments of sublime transport, of both self and world: a transcendence which is also a splitting of the self between material embodiment and immaterial transport.¹⁰⁷ Viewed as the apotheosis of the self through her imaginative, affective powers, such transports do not resolve the question of the subject's relation to the material world, but they express or transmute alienation into the form of aesthetic and imaginative power. Such transitory realisation of subjective powers offers a powerful rebuff to the shrinking of the self – the 'narrow enclosing of the self in one task' – prescribed by the division of labour, and refuses the narrative of the self's relation to the social whole (alienated, inert, stupefied, dependent) offered by political economy.¹⁰⁸ Importantly too, as we shall now see, aesthetic vision gives the subject a voice independent from the property order, in literary form.

'Desultory Letters'

For all its insights into the shortcomings of commercial society, *Short Residence* cannot resolve many of the questions it raises, nor reintegrate the alienated self to whom it gives voice. Its penultimate letter pulls no punches in condemning the 'whirlpool of gain', as 'dishonourable as gambling', in which the 'interests of nations are bartered by speculating merchants' through 'artful trains of corruptions'. Here is the 'mean machinery' which lurks behind the scenes of 'what are vulgarly termed great affairs', whose 'depredations' on 'human life' are likened to a 'swarm of locusts', and far exceed those of the earlier age of the 'sword'.¹⁰⁹ The text ends on a note of weariness: a disinclination for further 'rambles' and constant scene-changing; the fleeing of the 'spirit of observation'; a vision of the 'insignificant' cliffs of Dover, bathetic in comparison with those of Sweden

and Norway; and aimless wandering around 'dirty' Dover simply to 'kill time'.¹¹⁰ 'Take, O world! thy much indebted tear!' Wollstonecraft repeats from Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*: as much a jab at a world engulfed in commerce as a description of personal misery.¹¹¹ Signing off the final letter with her name, 'Mary', she reminds her reader of the epistolary nature of her writing, a form loose and flexible enough to contain the extraordinary variety of her observations, as well as to communicate enough of the narrator's own interiority to beguile its readers.¹¹² Ultimately, it is through the letter form that the self is sketched, conveyed, and individuated: through which a self not defined by, or against, property comes into being.

For Rousseau, the age of property was inaugurated with an act of enclosure: 'the first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, "This is mine", and came across people simple enough to believe him'.¹¹³ Although he admits that such a scene could only take place if the *idea* of property had already arisen, Rousseau's image of fencing off land depicts property as a demarcation and separation of what is owned from what is not, what is private from what is held in common. This is a model of property which the literary form of the letter fundamentally troubles. By opening itself out to the reader, the letter initiates dialogue; it is the sign and enactment of an exchange; it exists in order to share, not in order to fence off or keep out. Letters inhabit an interstitial space, a betweenness, the gap of possible communication between persons, and as such they have a peculiarly ambivalent relation to property. If left unshared, and retained in the possession of its author, the letter fails to fulfil its communicatory purpose; if possession and ownership transfer to the recipient, here is a property form, originating wholly in the labour of another, which may be obtained through no act of exchange or transaction, or perhaps even will. As John Brewer has commented, the personal letter thus raises 'fundamental questions about literary property'.¹¹⁴ Wollstonecraft's chosen form for *Short Residence* thus in itself poses the question of ownership and places the question of property centre stage. The multiple further ambivalences of the text (its disclosure of personal experience whose apparent specificity of reference remains nevertheless veiled; the anonymity of its addressee and, until the last page, of its speaker; its occupation of a generic space between travelogue, memoir, personal journal and autobiography; its reliance on, yet nondisclosure of, the motivating purpose of Wollstonecraft's journey) generate further ambiguities. Among Wollstonecraft's first acts of authorship was the compilation of anthologies which, as Brewer notes, were themselves innovative forms of literary property.¹¹⁵ It is wholly appropriate that in *A Short Residence*, she uses the letter form, a literary form

which so troubles conventional notions of property, and which redraws the boundaries between what is private and what is publically shared, to reconsider the place of the subject in a world defined by property, and to reorient the subject's relation to property order itself.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the letter form in the hands of Montesquieu inaugurated the dominant narrative of commercial modernity, the puzzle with which Wollstonecraft wrestles in *A Short Residence*, as throughout her work. In his later 'Reflections on *The Persian Letters*' (1754), Montesquieu explained his formal choice: 'in using the letter form, in which neither the choice of characters, nor the subjects discussed, have to fit in with any pre-conceived intentions or plans, the author has taken advantage of the fact that he can include philosophy, politics, and moral discourse ... and can connect everything together with a secret chain which remains, as it were, invisible'.¹¹⁶ Like a novel, the emergent cultural form of eighteenth-century commercial modernity, the *Persian Letters* cloaks an overarching order or narrative with apparent variety, difference, and plurality; unlike the anthology, which also collects together variety and difference, its defining ordering principles are not made overt to the reader. Montesquieu's image of the 'secret chain' echoes that of Samuel Johnson's near-contemporaneous evocation, in *The Adventurer* in 1753, of the 'secret concatenation' which 'links together' members of the human community.¹¹⁷ It also anticipates Smith's invisible hand, which, as we saw in an earlier section, replaces the profligate spending of the rich man as political economy's preferred figure for the unintended and beneficial distributive effects through which market society provides for its members, binding a 'society of strangers' together through the 'mediated and indirect' relations of the market.¹¹⁸ Like the disparate parts of Montesquieu's letter sequence, *Short Residence* similarly yokes apparently disconnected particulars and multiple themes with a secret, invisible chain of connection. As with the *Persian Letters*, it includes 'philosophy, politics ... moral discourse' and more, whilst mimicking the world of commercial modernity itself in its commitment to the variety of plural experiences which are collected and organised, in this case, through the eye and pen of the observing subject. In this case, then, it is the writing subject who provides the principle of connection and order, although she does this through the letter form which, posing the puzzle of the 'secret chain', plays with the gaps and spaces of unseen connections. In an early reflection on the nature of philosophical inquiry, in his prized essay on the 'History of Astronomy' which, unlike other discarded works, he kept throughout his life, Smith makes much of the gaps between observed phenomena, spaces bridged by

the connective leaps of the philosopher's imagination, as well as making use, like Montesquieu, of the image of the connective 'chain'.¹¹⁹ The gaps between observed particulars which for Smith are addressed by the privileged insight of the philosopher, become, in the literary form of the letters, available to all Wollstonecraft's readers.

The form of *A Short Residence* owes much too to Rousseau's *Reveries*, which, presented in a series of letter-like 'Walks', offered Wollstonecraft a model for loose, personal, unstructured writing. In his account of his method, Rousseau explains his chosen mode as the formal corollary of his project of self-revelation, self-inquiry, and self-consciousness:

These pages will in fact be merely a shapeless account of my reveries. They will often be about me, because a reflective solitary man necessarily thinks about himself a lot. What is more, all the strange ideas which come into my head as I walk will also find their place here. I shall say what I have thought just as it came to me and with as little connection as yesterday's ideas have with those of tomorrow. But a new awareness of my character and my temperament will nevertheless result from an awareness of the feelings and thoughts which feed my mind day by day in the strange state in which I find myself.¹²⁰

As Rousseau progresses, he compares his project to the 'sort of experiments that physicists perform on air to analyse its composition day by day. I shall apply the barometer to my soul, and these experiments, conducted well and repeated time and time again, might yield results as reliable as theirs'. At the same time, he will not attempt to reduce his experiments to 'a system'; rather, writing only for himself, his words will 'double my existence' by enabling him, in later years, to 'live with myself in another age, as if living with a younger friend'.¹²¹ An alternative expression of this loose, aimlessness, self-meditation is floating in the drifting boat as described above, a passage echoed pretty exactly in Wollstonecraft although, as we have seen, with markedly different import. In Rousseau, the self is the 'secret concatenation' between the different parts of his writing, and the splitting of his experience into different 'walks' and episodes enables him to understand, record, and re-experience himself as a connected person, a 'younger friend', seen through various perspectives as though through different angles of light. In Wollstonecraft, the loose 'experiment' of writing does not resolve itself into a record of the self in such a self-contained way: although in part this is what is achieved, there is a strong impression too of 'something getting', or remaining 'free'.¹²² Rousseau's self-experiment, his multiple moments of viewing himself, recalls Smith's unitary model of the subject in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, who works to assimilate all

his various perceptions into a relatively unified position of moral judgement and value, represented by the 'impartial spectator', the 'man within the breast', an internalised 'other' like Rousseau's 'younger friend'. In Wollstonecraft, by contrast, the gaze of the writing subject is diffracted into different directions, externally as well as internally focused, rendering the gaze dialogic, the speaker multivocal and complex. Rather than remembering the subject, the possibilities of dissolution, disappearance, and death often press themselves into consciousness, as with her thoughts of the fragility of existence discussed earlier, or her response to the sight of preserved bodies in Tonsberg: 'Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? this I, so much alive?'.¹²³ Even decaying pine forests suggest the thought that 'death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free', a slipping away into 'I know not what element' as the speaker herself appears to do, as she signs off at the end of the correspondence.¹²⁴ Undoubtedly, the self is offered as one point of organising principle, one element of the 'secret chain' in *A Short Residence*, but it is a self open to its own limits and finitude, shot through with a sense of the boundedness of human life and an urge to transcend or escape it. If, according to Rousseau's *Discourse*, freedom pertains to existence prior to individuation by property, the Wollstonecraftian persona asks how and whether freedom is possible after it. This is a text where the self never comes home, and is always on the road; where material embodiment is only one level of 'conscious being', and where the writing of experience as ongoingness, like that of travel, or of the correspondence itself, means that the self is never completed or fenced off like a defined object of property.¹²⁵ Not only Wollstonecraft's chosen literary form, but her very writing of the self, troubles the bounded and finite culture of property and accumulation which she inhabits and traverses.

In Smithian political economy, individuals, and the differences which exist between them, are the very origin of property society, as those differences prompt acts of exchange from which all benefit. A 'difference of talents' enables expression of 'the general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange'; thus 'every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of other men's talents he has occasion for', and the market emerges as the expression of social connection.¹²⁶ As we saw earlier, despite the insights of his specialised work, the philosopher may be unable to contribute to this social marketplace of the talents: as Smith comments, unless they 'happen to be placed in some very particular situations', philosophers risk contributing 'very little to the good government or happiness of their society'.¹²⁷ This observation in *The Wealth of Nations* undercuts the recommendation

in the earlier *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (again as we saw above) that philosophers might best advise legislators to best provide for their subjects by describing to them the 'great system' by which 'the wheels of the machine of government' might serve that end.¹²⁸ The 'secret connections' which the philosopher postulates as existing between things, in the work of the philosophical imagination, risk being of no benefit to the 'good government or happiness' of society. Here, as Ignatieff has commented, is a structural weakness in market society which lacks 'the means to know its own general interest as such – hence its unique vulnerability to faction and conflict among economic interests'.¹²⁹ In a society ruled by the division of labour, who can attend to the connection between its parts?

One answer to this problem is suggested by Montesquieu. As well as describing how the different concerns of his *Persian Letters* were linked together with a 'secret chain', he noted that '[n]othing pleased' his readers more than finding the work 'unexpectedly a sort of novel', one whose pleasures included characters giving 'a description of their present state' and 'communicat[ing] emotion' alongside those other matters, 'philosophy, politics, and moral discourse'.¹³⁰ Literary form, then, resolves the philosopher's problem of station and makes his contemplation of an 'infinite variety of objects', and his imaginative labour of connection, available to the reading public. Like the philosopher as described by Smith, Montesquieu's readers might exercise 'their minds in endless comparisons and combinations', to render 'their understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive' by viewing the 'infinite variety of objects' present in society. Against political economy's bridging of individual difference via transactional exchange, the novel offers a broader vision of social cohesion through the imaginative, emotional, and aesthetic pleasures of discovering 'secret chains' of connection; against the market's 'society of strangers', the novel offers the deep pleasures of knowing the self.¹³¹ Offering 'improvement' of the 'heart' and 'understanding', it counters the tendencies to stupidity and ignorance innate in commercial modernity, and in addressing, as it often does, the sympathies of its readers, it invites them to enact affective connection. Literary form, which, as a mode of textual comportment or conduct, might perhaps be considered as manners in writing, thus promises to continue the 'revolution in manners' for which Wollstonecraft has earlier called. In *Short Residence* too, the novel-like letters enable their readers to share the 'philosophical observations' of its author, tracing the links in its 'secret chain', whilst experiencing too the novelistic pleasure of communicated emotion, the self's fluctuating 'present states' revealed. The ambiguous literary form of the correspondence

thus offers a knowledge which is the property of both all and of no-one, made available in the public form of printed text, of literary object, but privately consumed. If, in Ignatieff's words, property is the 'progressive individuation of the means of subsistence', literary property participates in the sharing of talents facilitated by 'truck, barter or exchange' to offer its readers 'something' more than itself, perhaps 'something getting free'.¹³²

Montesquieu's description of the novel as presenting a variety of observed particulars mixed with philosophical, political, and moral discourse, and the pleasurable description of subjectivity and states of emotion, is a suggestive one. It makes a case for the novel as sharing with – or perhaps taking over from – philosophy the role of describing and understanding the world, and especially seeking the connections which link disparate appearances and seemingly unlinked phenomena. In this reading, the novel asks its readers to seek for the 'secret chain' which yokes and explains the world they live in, whilst offering too the affective pleasure of communicated states of subjectivity and the temporal, structural pleasure of experiencing 'beginning, development, and ending'.¹³³ All of this might explain why Wollstonecraft, who famously attacked the novel in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, turned to fiction in what would be the final, unfinished work of her career, finding there a form capable of attending to the concrete particulars of the lives of her protagonists in order to reveal larger truths about the world forged by political economy and the experience of female sensibility in it. As Chapter 6 shows, the work enabled Wollstonecraft to show the deep effects on female lives of a world governed by property, speculation, and the pursuit of wealth, in a 'secret chain' which yokes its oddly distanced and disparate scenes of action together. But whereas Smith's invisible hand describes pseudo-providential distributive acts which provide and sustain, in Wollstonecraft, the secret chain is the interlinked oppressions of modernity's property order and its gender system. At the same time, as we shall see, in exploring the role of dialogue, exchange, and communication, in a fiction made up of a community of sympathetic listeners and which addresses itself similarly to the sympathies of its readers, Wollstonecraft foregrounds a principle of affective connection, whose social force offers a promise of reckoning with, and perhaps countering, political economy's 'society of strangers'.