Mary Wollstonecraft as Historian

in An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe (1794)

Isabelle BOUR
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3

An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe (1794) is Mary Wollstonecraft’s one work of history. She wrote it while staying in France, from December 1792 to April 1795, at a time when it was dangerous to express reservations about the revolutionary government. It was also a time when there were very few women writing books of history. Wollstonecraft probably embarked on what she said would turn out to be « a considerable work » before June 1793, when she was already referring in a letter to her sister Eliza to her « great book ». The book which was published in late 1794 was to have been the first in a multi-volume history of the French Revolution, but she never went beyond this volume.

This may be because her chronicle of the revolution moved very slowly; by the end of the first volume, a fairly large quarto, she had only reached October 1789. More importantly, it may also be because the Historical and Moral View was, as Ralph Wardle put it, « her least original work », in some ways essentially a work of compilation sometimes very closely based on her sources. (Students of Wollstonecraft’s work have been unaware of this, or reluctant to admit it.) Those sources were The New Annual Register, or General Repository of History, Politics and Literature, the Courrier de Provence written by Mirabeau, the Assemblée nationale’s Journal des débats et des décrets (1789-1791), the Gazette nationale

3 Ibid., p. 231.
4 Ibid., p. 41.
5 Mirabeau’s Journal des États-Généraux became Lettres du Comte de Mirabeau à ses Commettans (1789) after 7 May, 1789, and then the Courrier de Provence (1789-1791).
6 In a letter of 3rd February 1794, Mary Wollstonecraft asks Ruth Barlow if her husband could procure « the debates and decrees » for her (op. cit., p. 250).
ou le Moniteur universel (1789-99), Thomas Christie’s Letters on the Revolution in France (1791) and the Marquis de Lally-Tollendal’s Mémoire (1790). Wollstonecraft sometimes paraphrases her current source for paragraphs on end. In contemporary reviews, only the conservative periodical The British Critic pointed that out.

So, one might wonder why I should want to discuss this work, coming after a – limited – number of scholars – historians, political scientists and scholars of English literature. That is because it is far from being merely a work of compilation. The narrative chapters are interspersed with theoretical ones, and there are reflective passages within the chronicle of events. Indeed, the *Monthly Review* stressed that Wollstonecraft wrote « this wonderful chapter in the history of the world not like an annalist, but like a philosopher ».

Further, contrary to what has been said by several exegetes of the *Historical and Moral View*, the narrator is not « markedly detached ».

Not only are there a number of emotional outbursts, but Wollstonecraft’s use of tropes and figures is distinctive and well removed from an « objectivity » which historians were only striving towards in the late eighteenth century. It is interesting to see how she sometimes rewrites the accounts she relies on, heightening the emotional tone, introducing quasi-fictional techniques. So,


8 Those, which are not always completely discrete from the narrative chapters are : Chapter I in Book I and Book II, Chapter II of Book II, Chapter III of Book IV and the final chapter, Chapter IV of Book V.


11 About the events of 17 July, 1789 : « The New Annual Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Literature, For the Year 1791, p. 27-28 : « On their arrival at the Hôtel de Ville, the king solemnly confirmed the election of M. Bailly and the marquis de la Fayette ; and on receiving the complimentary addresses of the mayor, the president of electors, count Lally Tolendal, &c. he exclaimed with an air of pathetic emotion, which scarcely allowed him utterance – « My people may always rely upon my affection. He received from the hands of the mayor the national cockade ; and when he shewed himself at the window with this badge of patriotism, the joy of the people could no longer be restrained ; the shout of Vive le roi! which had scarcely been heard in the former part of the day, filled the whole atmosphere, and resounded from one extremity of the city to the other ». Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, p. 121 : « Louis seems to have been forcibly struck by the energy every where displayed ; and not more by the eloquent discourses addressed to him at the hôtel-de-ville, than by the countenance of each citizen : for the fire of liberty had already lighted up in every face the serene lustre of manly firmness. – So impressed, indeed, was his mind by the whole scene, that, when the animated speakers were silent, he exclaimed in reply – ‘My people! My people, may always rely on my love.’ – And taking the national cockade from the hands of the mayor, he appeared at the window with his heart in his eyes, as if eager to convince the multitude of his sincerity : and perhaps these words, the repetition of which flew like lightning from rank to rank, the whole concourse of people caught the electric sympathy. – Vive-le-roi was shouted from every quarter ; and revived affection glowed with the fresh fervour, that effaces the
while it may be true that Wollstonecraft is « not a sophisticated historian »\(^\text{12}\), as Barbara Taylor put it, her view of the revolution is intrinsically interesting, and may also throw some light on the theoretical framework in her other expository works.

It seems to me that the *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* has elicited three kinds of critical approach: broadly, they may be said to be literary, philosophical and psychological. In 1992, Vivien Jones, a pioneer, offered a reading of the book in terms of literary genre, showing how, to some extent, it rewrote the plot of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, becoming a kind of « Richardsonian Gothic fiction »\(^\text{13}\). Much more recently, Daniel O’Neill, building up on Jane Rendall’s excellent 1997 article, has shown how much Wollstonecraft relies on the theoretical model for historical development propounded by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. The psychological approach is illustrated, very eccentrically, I think, by Ashley Tauchert, who tried to show that Wollstonecraft’s detached tone was « founded on a displacement of anxiety about inhabiting a female body »\(^\text{14}\), in a rejection of her illegitimate pregnancy during much of the time when she was writing the *Historical and Moral View*. This same approach, with a strong epistemological slant, helps John Whale to illuminate the interaction between reason and imagination in Wollstonecraft’s works.

Vivien Jones thinks that, in Wollstonecraft’s account of the French Revolution, there are tensions between rationalism and her fictional paradigms\(^\text{15}\). O’Neill coyly and reverently speaks of the « complexity » of Wollstonecraft’s argument\(^\text{16}\). I will argue, more radically, that there are contradictions and inconsistencies in Wollstonecraft’s representation of the early events of the French Revolution, and that those are due to her reliance, on the one hand, on what was in her day the most influential account of historical development, that of the Scottish Enlighteners and, on the other hand, on the paradigm of sensibility inflected by fantastic gothic characterisation. Unlike Vivien Jones, I am not primarily interested in types of narrative emplotment, but in the intellectual consequences of reading behaviour in terms of sensibility and resorting to the rhetoric of sensibility. Unlike Daniel O’Neill, I will not try to argue for the consistency of Wollstonecraft’s use of the laws of development laid down by the so-called theoretical historians. Close


\(^{14}\) A. Tauchert, art. cit., p. 182.

\(^{15}\) V. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

analysis of Wollstonecraft’s simultaneous use of a rationalist theoretical framework and an empiricist epistemology will explain the irreconcilable readings of the French Revolution she offers. I will also highlight the tension between her condemnation of the effeminate sensibility of the French nation and her frequent use of a sentimental rhetoric and gothic-sentimental character types, in a construal of causation which lays stress on the individual rather than complex networks of causal factors.

Though, in the *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, Mary Wollstonecraft mentions none of the Scottish conjectural or theoretical historians, she unmistakably uses their rational account of historical progress, from a savage or barbaric state, through a pastoral stage, an agricultural one, to a commercial one – that reached by Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. The names of the various stages vary slightly with the various authors, but Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, who are the main proponents of this « conjectural », reconstructive approach to the study of history, essentially agree. As for Wollstonecraft, in her preface, she refers to the advancement of communities « from a state of barbarism to that of polished society » (p. 6), after highlighting in the Advertisement that she has « been led into several theoretical investigations » (p. 5). For Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, phylogeny and ontogeny run in parallel. Mary Wollstonecraft clearly takes up this notion. In the very first sentence of her book, she refers to « the infancy of man, his gradual advance towards maturity, his miserable weakness as a solitary being, and the crudeness of his first notions respecting the nature of civil society » (p. 15). As Virginia Sapiro says, in Wollstonecraft, « [t]he early stages of civilisation correspond to the early stages of the human being, in that reason did not yet rule ».

For the theoretical historians, change is not the result of the actions of an individual or a few individuals, but is always the outcome of a complex network of causes, both proximate and remote. In the same way, Wollstonecraft stresses, in her preface, that « we shall be able to discern clearly that the revolution was neither produced by the abilities or intrigues of a few individuals ; nor was the effect of sudden and short-lived enthusiasm » (p. 6). Wollstonecraft inflects the model she uses by stressing the importance of the progress of the human mind, and thus of knowledge, where her Scottish sources see the matrix of change as being the nature of economic activity and the concurrent development of civil society. Wollstonecraft sees progress in terms of human perfectibility, as she spells out :


I feel confident of being able to prove, that the people are essentially good, and that knowledge is rapidly advancing to that degree of perfectibility, when the proud distinctions of sophisticating fools will be eclipsed by the mild rays of philosophy, and man be considered as man – acting with the dignity of an intelligent being. (p. 46)

The kind of knowledge she has in mind has Baconian overtones; she says that « the progress of the sciences alone can make men wiser and happier » (note 1, p. 111). She establishes a clear link between the rise of epistemological empiricism and political progress.

What has gone wrong with Russia helps to understand why the French Revolution has gone awry. Catherine II has mistakenly tried to have her country switch from an early stage of socio-economic development to the last one (p. 114-115). In the same way, French Revolutionaries have tried to give their country institutions which could succeed only in a country with a parliamentary tradition. This could only fail. The need for very slow, gradual change, explains why Wollstonecraft is in favour of a bi-cameral political system for France, and of the royal veto. Intrinsically, a mono-cameral system is better, and the monarch should not be able to counter the decisions of the people’s representatives, but it is too early in France for such institutions. As she puts it, the French « seem to have fixed on a system proper only for a people in the highest stage of civilisation : – a system of itself calculated to disorganise the government, and throw embarrassments into all it’s [sic] operations » (p. 161-162). The need for slow change also explains Wollstonecraft’s defence of prejudices, the abrupt removal of which often makes room for despotism, she claims (p. 45).

The pattern of stadial progress from barbarism to « polished society » thus informs Wollstonecraft’s reading of the French Revolution. It provides her with the main tools for explaining why the Revolution has gone so wrong. Let us remember that she was in France during the Terror, and had to pretend to be American not to be in danger of her life; she was writing about the events of 1789 with the bitter experience of 1792 and 1793. Wollstonecraft has a grand narrative which makes sense of the Revolution – the people had acquired enough knowledge and moral ambition to start the Revolution but, corrupted as they were by their experience of the old régime, and over-eager to bring about a new society, they could not but lead their own country into a crisis. This was because progress in French civilisation was lop-sided: manners had become very refined, but not morals, and the divine right monarchy was irretrievably corrupt.

19 « In the progress of knowledge, which however was very tardy in Europe, because the men who studied were content to see nature through the medium of books, without making any actual experiments themselves, the benefits of civil liberty began to be better understood : and in the same proportion we find the chains of despotism becoming lighter » (p. 115).
This grand narrative overrides another one which is to be felt here and there, that of emplotment of French history as an epic, with the simple Stoics – the people – pitched against degenerate representatives of humanity, the lecherous and sybaritic Catholic clergy and the aristocracy. But what really undermines Wollstonecraft’s attempt at « philosophical » history writing is her use of the paradigm of sensibility and her tendency to turn a few key historical figures, such as Calonne, Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette into gothic villains. This is an aspect of her inclination, which is indirect contradiction with her use of the stadial paradigm, to see some events in terms of individual behaviour, occasionally in terms of individual plotting. Then her argument becomes psychological and personal rather than systemic and universal.

This is emblematised by her personification of government and of public opinion, when she discusses Loménie de Brienne’s rule as controller general of finance in 1788-1789. Of the government she says that « like a dying wretch cut off by intemperance, whilst the lust of enjoyment still remaining prompts him to exhaust his strength by struggling with death, [it] sought some time longer inauspiciously for existence » (p. 37), and of opinion she states that it bore « on its [sic] fair bosom the new sentiments of liberty with irresistible force » (p. 37). In similar fashion, Wollstonecraft sees the decline of Greco-Roman civilisation as caused by « the highest degree of sensual refinement [which] violates all the genuine feelings of the soul, making the understanding the abject slave of the imagination » (p. 111). Sybaritism enervates mankind, in other words. What was wrong with old-régime France was slightly different, though with similarly deleterious effects. « [A] variety of causes have so effeminated reason, that the French may be considered as a nation of women » (p. 121). Of course, there are Rousseauian overtones here, but my point is that the argument becomes psychological, and is based on the notion of a perversion of sensibility. This assumption appears in a statement such as the following: « An affectation of humanity is the affectation of the day » (p. 112). That there is a good kind of sensibility is shown by Wollstonecraft's account of the scenes which took place when the members of the Assemblée nationale swore that « they would not separate, till a constitution should be completed »: « The benedictions that dropped from every tongue, and sparkled in tears of joy from every eye, giving fresh vigour to the heroism which excited them, produced an overflow of sensibility that kindled into a blaze of patriotism every social feeling » (p. 65). This passage is replete with the lexicon of sensibility – tears of joy, overflow of sensibility, social feeling – and it is clear that the right kind of sensibility, through the action of sympathy, strengthens social bonds and naturally leads to patriotism. By contrast, « polished society » is « so far sunk in fastidious delicacy » that it « could not even discover magnanimity in the conduct of a peasant, or a shopkeeper » (p. 65). Wollstonecraft has an explanation for this perversion of natural benevolence:
It is certain, that education, and the atmosphere of manners in which a character is formed, change the natural laws of humanity; otherwise it would be unaccountable, how the human heart can be so dead to the tender emotions of benevolence, which most forcibly teach us, that real or lasting felicity flows only from a love of virtue, and the practice of sincerity. (p. 72)

The French have turned sensibility into sensuality and overwrought refinement, they have thus perverted nature. Wollstonecraft extends here to the whole of the French nation her argument about women in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). As she claims there, and in the novel *Mary* (1788), genuine, unadulterated sensibility is fully compatible with the dictates of reason. In the French, sensibility is fitful and misdirected: « these transient gusts of feeling prevent their forming those firm resolves of reason, that, bracing the nerves, when the heart is moved, make sympathy yield to principles, and the mind triumph over the senses » (p. 122). This is a kind of summary of her account of mental faculties and the interrelation between mind and body.

Put together with Wollstonecraft’s verdict that the French are a nation of women, this depiction of a perverted sensibility recasts political and economic problems as psychological and moral ones. This individualisation of her argument explains her ascribing the march of the market women on Versailles in the night of 5th October to the villainous plotting of the duke of Orléans. Here, it is notable that Wollstonecraft diverges from her source, the *New Annual Register*, which does not in the least suggest that the mob had been commissioned by the duke of Orléans. The duke is a compound of a gothic villain and a gross sensualist.20 While a womaniser, he is also feminised by his objective resemblance with the lowest representatives of womanhood: « To a disposition for low intrigue was added also a decided preference for the grossest libertinism, seasoned with vulgarity, highly congenial with the manners of the heroines, who composed the singular army of the females » (p. 207). Even more degenerate is Louis XVI, initially depicted as an indecisive, but intelligent and good man (p. 74-75). We are told of « [t]his man, whose bestiality had been carefully pampered by the queen and count d’Artois because in those moments of revelry, prolonged to the most disgusting excess of gluttony and intoxication, he would sanction all their demands » (p. 188). He is supposed to have enjoyed seeing animals suffer (p. 74), to have treated the queen, « for whom he had a kind of devouring passion » « with great brutality » when he felt jealous.21 As for Marie-Antoinette, « [i]t then surpizing, that a very desirable woman, with a sanguine constitution, should […] be employed to vary the pleasures, which emasculated her circean court? » This picture of the monarchs as dangerous perverts perverting the nation concludes apocalyptically: « added to this, the histories of the Julias and Messalinas of antiquity, convincingly prove, that

---

20 The portrait of Calonne is in the same vein (p. 31).
21 One is reminded here of the character of George Venables in Wollstonecraft’s posthumous novel, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798).
there is no end to the vagaries of the imagination, when power is unlimited, and reputation set at defiance» (p. 73). The vagaries of the imagination, indeed. Well may Wollstonecraft say, about the French court, that its «splendid folly and wanton prodigality» eclipsed «all that has been related in history, or told in romance» (p. 31).

Such passages are more an efflorescence of gothic-romantic fantasies of the kind one found in the cheap novels of the Minerva Press than the balanced assessments of the historian. Wollstonecraft seems to have been aware of the challenge she faced as a historian when she wrote in her preface: «To sketch these vicissitudes is a task so arduous and melancholy, that, with a heart trembling to the touches of nature, it becomes necessary to guard against the erroneous inferences of sensibility» (p. 6).

The theatricality of some of Wollstonecraft’s language is analogous to the artificiality she deplored in French society. There, theatricality was displayed in the rituals of polite life and, more damagingly, in political hypocrisy.

Thus are two different forms of causation juxtaposed, rather than concomitant, in Mary Wollstonecraft’s account of the French Revolution; they become tangible when one actually studies the working-out of her theoretical framework in her historical narrative. There is a complex socio-economic kind of causation, operating over long periods in a slow manner, and a psychological kind of causation, operating over the span of a human life. Phylogeny and ontogeny have thus become discrete. Ultimately, these discrete models might perhaps be put down to Wollstonecraft’s desperate attempt at justifying continued support for a revolution which she saw becoming more and more violent and despotic.

Her intellectual distress can occasionally be felt in straightforward contradictions. She mostly holds that the revolution failed because change happened too suddenly (p. 213), but at least once she maintains that «the revolution in France has been progressive» (p. 183). Indeed, usually, at the end of chapters, after recounting a number of episodes in which things went wrong, she strikes an optimistic note, repeating that the situation will take a turn for the better, ultimately (see, for instance, p. 167).

On the one hand, Wollstonecraft says that there has been – more or less smooth – progress since antiquity, with man becoming more reasonable, and society potentially fairer; on the other hand, she shows that the aristocracy have a degenerate sensibility; as for the sensibility of the people, and of revolutionaries, it is liable to be vitiated by the vice endemic in French society. If we remember the link she makes (on page 122) between strong feeling, active benevolence, and the

rule of reason over the senses, it is difficult to see how the French Revolution could turn out well, and how the French could escape from a turpitude which, she says, has permeated their society for many years. The « polished slavery », which she arrestingly (and somewhat oxymoronically) describes as characterising France before the revolution, has caused a disruption in the interaction of mental and bodily capacities. The grand narrative collapses into the little romance. The uneasy co-existence of two interpretive frameworks may ultimately (and finally) be illustrated by Mary Wollstonecraft’s somewhat surprising attempt to set up as models to be imitated French women from the gentry, after she has repeatedly deplored the artificiality of French social life, at least in the upper echelons of society:

they [French women] acquired a portion of taste and knowledge rarely to be found in the women of other countries […] Their coquetry is not only more agreeable, but more natural: and not left a prey to unsatisfied sensations, they were less romantic indeed than the english; yet many of them possessed delicacy of sentiment. (p. 148)

This kind of woman combines urbanity, a coquettishness which promotes sociability and the perpetuation of the species, a cultivated taste and reason, as well as true sensibility. She seems to offer a – purely ideal – way out of the aporias of the combination of stadial historical development and an empiricist epistemology and ethics. Cherchez la femme.

Works cited


New Annual Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Literature, For the Year 1791, London, Robinson, 1792.


Peardon, Thomas Preston, The Transition in English Historical Writing 1760-1830, New York, Columbia UP, 1933.


