

**Once Upon A Journey
Travel Narratives by Women:
The Philosophical Observations of Mary Wollstonecraft and
the Cultural Meme of Elizabeth Gilbert**

**by
Reema Faris**

M.B.A., University of Toronto, 1990
B.A., University of British Columbia, 1983

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
Graduate Liberal Studies Program
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

**© Reema Faris 2015
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2015**

All rights reserved.
However, in accordance with the *Copyright Act of Canada*, this work may be reproduced, without authorization, under the conditions for "Fair Dealing." Therefore, limited reproduction of this work for the purposes of private study, research, criticism, review and news reporting is likely to be in accordance with the law, particularly if cited appropriately.

Approval

Name: Reema Faris
Degree: Master of Arts
Title: *Once Upon A Journey
Travel Narratives by Women: The Philosophical
Observations of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Cultural
Meme of Elizabeth Gilbert*

Examining Committee: **Chair:** Gary McCarron
Associate Professor, Dept. of Communication
Graduate Chair, Graduate Liberal Studies Program

Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon
Senior Supervisor
Professor, Department of Humanities

Eleanor Stebner
Supervisor
Associate Professor & Chair,
Department of Humanities

Sandra Djwa
External Examiner
Professor Emerita,
Department of English
Simon Fraser University

Date Defended/Approved: October 15, 2015

Abstract

This work analyzes travel writing by Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Gilbert to demonstrate that travel by women serves as a technology of the self or a means by which to attain a certain state of being. This examination of travel narratives from two different eras also reflects a shift in the nature of travel from a knowledge-expanding endeavour to a self-indulgent one prioritizing individual benefits. This emergent emphasis on travel as a means to self-improvement rather than self-understanding perpetuates traditional values, upholds the patriarchal system of male privilege, and undermines the struggle for women's equality in an era of apparent female empowerment and self-sufficiency. This project also functions as a testament of the value of an academic journey, one based on thinking about and reflecting upon a topic of interest with greater insight as the final destination and reward.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft; Elizabeth Gilbert; Technology of the Self; Travel Writing; Self Help; Women's Identity

Dedication

To my mother whose life journey of a thousand and one stories ended much too soon. Her inspiration will forever guide me and her spirit will continue to infuse my work. I am saddened she will never see this effort completed.

To my father and my family whose enthusiasm carries me along life's path. Your faith in me, along with your unwavering support, will get me to my destination no matter how much I protest and procrastinate. That is love.

And to my son Luc whose talent, creativity, and intelligence have enriched my state of being and whose taste for chocolate surpasses mine: the future is yours.

Acknowledgements

The list of people I want to and need to thank is extensive and, given the fallibility of memory, my list is neither exhaustive nor complete.

My thanks to Professor Michael Kenny whose course on Technologies of the Self, which was offered as part of the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Simon Fraser University in the Spring of 2012, inspired this work.

Thanks, too, to Professors Nicky Didicher, Stephen Duguid, and June Sturrock for their input on items relating to the development and writing of this project.

Professors Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon and Eleanor Stebner were unfailing in their support and encouragement even when I stalled in my efforts. In particular, Dr. Feenberg-Dibon's strong guiding hand ensured that this exploration and this experience were memorable and worthwhile.

My fellow GLS students were companions throughout the process of learning, reflecting, and writing. Pansy Chau and Wendy Lyons offered their insight and challenged me to think deeper. It was Elisabeth Kyle who said, "You know what? That reminds me of Mary Wollstonecraft," a guiding question that helped me set the framework for this work and this experience.

Above all, I wish to acknowledge my nephew Omar Chu who pushed me to write, who set an example for me with his own work, who edited and critiqued my efforts graciously, and who reassured me – often and patiently – that what I was doing had meaning and purpose. Thank you Omar – you led the way.

Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Preface.....	viii
Itinerary: Departure.....	1
Notes.....	6
Connecting: The Self and Travel.....	7
Notes.....	14
Traveller: Mary Wollstonecraft.....	15
Pre-Boarding.....	16
Narrative Form.....	17
Relationship to Transcendence.....	22
Identity At Takeoff.....	25
Notes.....	30
On the Road.....	32
Intention.....	32
Destination.....	36
Experience.....	39
Engagement.....	42
Consequences: Understanding and Self.....	48
Notes.....	52
Traveller: Elizabeth Gilbert.....	55
Pre-Boarding.....	56
Narrative Form.....	56
Relationship to Transcendence.....	59
Identity At Takeoff.....	62
Notes.....	66
On the Road.....	67
Intention.....	67
Destination.....	70
Experience.....	74
Engagement.....	79
Consequences: Understanding and Self.....	85
Notes.....	92

The Return Home	95
Notes	103
Postcard	104
References	106

Preface

“The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. ... The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.”

Michel Foucault

“What a large number of factors constitute a single human being! How very many layers we operate on, and how very many influences we receive from our minds, our bodies, our histories, our families, our cities, our souls and our lunches!”

Elizabeth Gilbert

“Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness!”

Mary Wollstonecraft

“For self is a sea boundless and measureless.
Say not, ‘I have found the truth,’ but rather, ‘I have found a truth.’
Say not, ‘I have found the path of the soul.’ Say rather, ‘I have met the soul walking upon my path.’ ”

Kahlil Gibran

“The quest for self-understanding is a journey without end.”

Patrick Hutton

Itinerary: Departure

Travellers test their understandings, their views, and their preconceptions of the world when they encounter new places and new people. They test themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, as they respond to new environments and new situations. Their fears and hopes, their desires and their goals seem to come into sharper focus or to crumble.

Travel operates as a dream that liberates individuals from the constraints of everyday existence. Travellers can access desires and traits they have repressed in order to function within the established norms of their societies and their communities. It is an opportunity to fulfill wishes and transgress boundaries.¹

In effect, travel functions as a technology of the self which French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault defines this way:

Technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.²

Applying the technologies of the self is a process of collecting experiences and gaining knowledge to further self-understanding, if not to effect self-transformation, and to define one's way of being in the world.

To document the state one attains through travel, an individual may choose to write, publish, and distribute a travel narrative. Such a work serves as a public testament of an individual's journey, experience, new understanding, and self-transformation. This approach is available to all travellers and my focus is on travel writing by women, specifically work by Elizabeth Gilbert and Mary Wollstonecraft.

In the contemporary context, Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love (EPL)* has captured the popular imagination with her story of a woman's self-discovery through travel. If the value of travel also depends on the insight it offers into the human condition, then Gilbert's work stands in stark contrast to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Letters)*. These two books, by authors from different eras and writing in different styles, can be situated together within the travel-writing genre for comparative purposes because "[genres are not] fixed categories but ... fluid ones that change over time as the result of complex interplay of authors, audiences, and literary and cultural institutions."³

In June 1795 Mary Wollstonecraft, the author, philosopher, and early women's rights advocate, set off to investigate and recover the fortune lost by her former lover, Gilbert Imlay. With an infant and a nursemaid as companions, and only two weeks after her first suicide attempt, she embarked on a journey to Scandinavia. Following her return to England, Wollstonecraft published a collection of her letters, a collection that editors of a modern edition describe as "the book best received by her contemporaries and [which] can still claim to be among her greatest achievements."⁴

Wollstonecraft's plan, in her own words, "was simply to endeavour to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through."⁵ Yet her book is remarkable for moving beyond the realm of scholarly observation. Written in the intimacy of the first person, readers enjoy Wollstonecraft's book now, as readers did when it was originally published, for her personal reflections and feelings as well as for her observations about the countries she visited and the critical insights she offered into her time. Contemporaries devoured Wollstonecraft's book. The *Analytical Review*, the *British Critic*, and the *Monthly Mirror* ran reviews, there was an American publication, and the book was translated into a number of different European languages.⁶

Gilbert's book, published in 2006, chronicles her travels through Italy, India, and Indonesia after experiencing divorce and depression. It was a journey of self-discovery through which she found physical, spiritual, and emotional satisfaction. The commercial success of the book, which was also made into a feature film, catapulted Gilbert into the rarefied atmosphere of international celebrity. It occupied a spot on the New York Times

Best Seller List for more than 200 weeks and there are over ten million copies of the book in print.⁷ Modern-day readers, along with movie viewers, critics, and cultural pundits have embraced Gilbert's travel memoir with praise and adoration or dismissed it with disparagement and disdain.

By selecting these books for this exploration of travel as a technology of the self, I am not asserting an equivalency in their aesthetic value. I am also not suggesting that these works have had the same impact when considered in their cultural context. That would be an impossible task given the rashness of establishing objective assessment criteria that would be equally valid in eighteenth century Europe as it would be in the United States of America of the twenty-first century. Nor is this an exhaustive survey of each author's life story, her times, or her body of work. In the case of Wollstonecraft, the length and breadth of scholarship amounts to more than 200 years of study. Similarly, the goal of this project is not to judge whether or not each journey was a success or a successful transformation of self.

Rather, my focus is to explore a central question which reasonably applies to both texts and which is based on the notion of an individual self. That is, in what way did travel serve Wollstonecraft and Gilbert as an operation on their "bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" that enabled them to attain a state of self-understanding or to effect a state of self-transformation?⁸

The analytical comparison of these two texts also reflects a fundamental shift in Western society towards individualism. In the distance between Wollstonecraft and Gilbert, travel narratives by women have moved from observational studies of the world to deeply personal explorations of self. They have moved from thoughts on how to improve life for the many on a global scale to an obsessive focus on transforming the self in what Roman Krznaric calls a hyper-individualized world.⁹

Wollstonecraft's work is an intellectual and philosophical text that is also an account of a woman's search for greater self-understanding. It captures her anger at the injustices she saw in the world around her and is a testament to her desire for power and control over her own life. Her writing displays an honesty Carolyn Heilbrun argues is often

missing from published stories of women's lives and it transgresses the societal prohibitions Heilbrun thinks constrain women's voices.¹⁰

Gilbert's work is not an inspirational tale of female self-actualization as much as it is a prescriptive work, a recipe for finding happiness, replete with Disney-like fairy-tale elements of rescue, wish fulfillment, romance, and happy endings. It is an ideal representation of a woman's life written in a way that corresponds to an accepted form of female autobiography.¹¹

EPL is a cultural meme which instructs a woman to find her true self and to attain a state of happiness through travel when she is unable to realize these in her established way of being, her current manner of existing in the world.¹² Gilbert's book is a sophisticated subset of the self-help genre, a genre that Jessica Lamb-Shapiro says "is so simultaneously debunked, adored, and ignored that it's possible to assign any meaning to it you desire. If you hate self-help, it is an exercise in futility that robs fools of their money and dignity. If you love self-help, it is a structure for self-betterment, an opportunity for enlightenment."¹³

What are the implications then if the modern bestseller, which purports to be a journey of self-transformation through travel, is a self-help fairy tale as contrasted to the eighteenth century work, which has been recognized as a philosophical treatise, yet is also a document of striving for self-understanding?

Fairy tales serve as powerful cultural tools to obscure a woman's full realization of self. As novelist and journalist Angela Carter argues in her work, fairy tales and myths focus on women's passivity, innocence, and lack of power. These are all obstacles to women achieving equal standing in society.¹⁴

In his analysis of the durability of classical fairy tales, Jack Zipes writes, "classical fairy tales tend to be overtly patriarchal and politically conservative in structure and theme and reflect the dominant interests of social groups that control cultural forces of production and reproduction."¹⁵

As such, there may be danger in this shift of travel and travel writing for women from an exploration of ideas to a storybook metamorphosis. Wollstonecraft's *Letters* fits into a body of work that challenged the dominant social, cultural, and political ideologies of her time. In contrast, Gilbert's EPL, with its fairy-tale and self-help characteristics, reinforces the dominant ideologies of today.

Notes

- ¹ A summary of key points in Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams*, ed. & trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989).
- ² Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.
- ³ Ron Gottesman, general editor's statement to *Travel Writing: The Self and The World* by Casey Blanton (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997), vii.
- ⁴ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction to *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* by Mary Wollstonecraft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ix.
- ⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, ed. Tone Brekke and Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
- ⁶ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, Appendix 5 to *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* by Mary Wollstonecraft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ⁷ "Eat, Pray, Love," *Elizabeth Gilbert*, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/books/eat-pray-love/>
- ⁸ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 18.
- ⁹ Roman Krznaric, "How To Start An Empathy Revolution", TEDxAthens YouTube video, 17:14, January 28, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT5X6NIJR88>.
- ¹⁰ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 13.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹² Cultural meme as discussed in Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiii, 4.
- ¹³ Jessica Lamb-Shapiro, *Promise Land: My Journey Through America's Self-Help Culture*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 4.
- ¹⁴ An overview of Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago Press, 2009) with specific reference to 88, 165-167. Carter's vision of fairy tales is demonstrated in her stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, (London: Vintage Books, 2006).
- ¹⁵ Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales*, 2.

Connecting: The Self and Travel

Before analyzing Wollstonecraft's *Letters* and Gilbert's *EPL*, I will consider the shift from self-understanding towards self-improvement in Western culture and the development of travel writing as a narrative form. I will also elaborate on Foucault's concept of technologies of the self as a framework for my analysis.

Why has the drive to self-improvement become such an integral concept in Western culture, particularly in North America?

The drive to self-improvement has roots in the Protestant notion of a personal calling and the means by which one fulfills that calling. It is a phenomenon captured by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in which he explores the rise of capitalism in the West and why it altered social organization.

In Weber's view, the idea of a calling or vocation gained prominence through the Reformation and was adapted by Calvinism and other Protestant denominations especially those of an ascetic nature. Lutheranism, for example, admonished the faithful to stay in the calling God had bestowed upon them and to honour that vocation via active participation in the world rather than contemplative study. Weber says:

[A]t least one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This it was [sic.] which inevitably gave every-day worldly activity a religious significance, and which first created the conception of a calling in this sense. ... The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling.¹

Calvinism solidified the notion of predestination as a tenet of faith. It coloured the fabric of Puritan Protestantism and emphasized anti-hedonism as a characteristic of the religion. Individuals provided proof of salvation through the fulfillment of their calling and

by accumulating the rewards of hard work, not by spending them on luxuries. In Weber's view this isolated the individual and led to "the entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion, because they are of no use toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions."²

The measure of a person's self-worth became increasingly individualized. It was reflected in one's moral behaviour and character, one's self-sufficiency and hard work, one's denial of pleasure and accumulation of wealth.

Weber argued that Protestant cultures retained this ethic even as the dominance of religion in society waned. As a result, individuals in the modern Western world became more like corporate entities living for their jobs in a capitalistic system that demanded discipline, sobriety, hard work, rationality, and efficiency. The advent of secularism replaced the moral values of religion with a system in which "the earning of money ... is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling."³ This virtue and proficiency in a calling was manifested externally so that an individual's moral worth in society became associated with what they had whether that was viewed in terms of material possessions, social status, or economic power.

The notion of an individual's calling in life is a key thematic element in Wollstonecraft's *Letters*. Although the eighteenth century Wollstonecraft predates Weber's twentieth century analysis, her calling, as Weber defined it, was to advocate on behalf of women and the economically disadvantaged. She clamoured for improvements to social conditions, in keeping with her calling and in conjunction with the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment, because the emerging effects of industrialization and the political ramifications of the French Revolution disturbed her.

Since Wollstonecraft's time acceptance of the notion of selfhood has increased. Individualism has emerged as a driving force in Western culture and exhibiting virtue and proficiency in a calling has become the foundation for continual self-improvement. The purpose of life is enmeshed with efforts to identify one's calling, to fulfill that calling, and to address one's shortcomings in doing so by striving to be better and to gain more material evidence of one's success. The struggle of individuals is to find their place

within the economic, political, and social realities of the capitalistic system. Sociologist and cultural critic Micki McGee characterizes this struggle as a search for one's true self, a "self perennially at work on itself and the self labored over by the self" which she calls the "belabored self."⁴

Gilbert is a belabored self and *EPL* is the story of her search for her calling following setbacks in her personal life. Her quest is a struggle to reassert her value in a capitalistic system as an individual bereft of the usual benchmarks of social success such as marriage, wealth, and occupation. It is a continual search for meaning in a secular context that McGee summarizes as "the contemporary imperative to invent one's life [to] mitigate meaninglessness in the face of death."⁵ McGee also sees this need to exert control over one's life as "the background *raison d'être* of the self-improvement literature's admonitions to relentlessly work on the self."⁶

If people are driven to perpetually engage in a process of self-improvement to prove their worth to society, what role does travel and travel writing play in providing a foundation for this endeavour?

Travel removes men and women from their customary milieus and forces them to navigate the unknown. By encountering the unknown, travellers are required to acknowledge the existence of the *Other* and travel writing serves as a testament of their reactions to and relationships with the *Other*. The traveller's narrative tells a story of increasing self-awareness because it documents the engagement between one's self and the world. Travel is where a person's inner and outer worlds collide.⁷

By the eighteenth century, according to Professor Casey Blanton, this entanglement with the *Other* became a central preoccupation for travel writers.⁸ The stimuli to which a traveller was exposed contributed to the development of one's intellect and the Grand Tour emerged "as a kind of finishing school for university students and writers" to complete one's education.⁹

The literary and symbolic narrative power of travel writing captures both the inner and outer journey of the traveller-author. Just as the outer journey of travel pushes an individual to a greater understanding of the *Other*, the inner journey pushes an individual

to a greater understanding of *Self* as characterized by encounters with one's values, behaviours, and psychology.

Travel writing is a personal form of storytelling and constitutes a quest cycle encompassing the pattern of departure, adventure, and return.¹⁰ In Blanton's interpretation, which incorporates the ideas of Joseph Campbell, this quest cycle is a hero's journey whereby "the hero is seen as one who travels along a path of self-improvement and integration, doing battle with the 'others' who are the unresolved parts of himself or herself. Wholeness is associated with homecoming when the quest cycle is complete."¹¹

Viewed through the lens of the hero's journey, travel becomes a means by which a person seeks wholeness in order to claim his or her place in society when he or she returns. The quest is to learn more about one's self, to reconcile one's self to one's identity, and to be able to fulfill one's calling in society.

Blanton chronicles further movement towards the incorporation of the self into the travel-writing genre during the transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic period. She argues that during this time "desire replaces duty as the motivation for travel."¹² The influence of American writing introduced new approaches, too. Blanton writes:

Both American fiction and the American travel narratives that influenced it share a response to the idea of travel as a symbolic act, heavy with promises of a new life, progress, and the thrill of escape. ... American travel literature is almost always 'about' something else, something beyond the senses of the traveler or even the world he sees.¹³

In Wollstonecraft's *Letters* we can see the emerging centrality of the self in travel writing in her use of the genre to explore her ideas, thoughts, and observations as well her feelings and emotions. This helps to explain the intimate and enthusiastic nature of the intellectual community's reaction to the work's initial publication. It was new, not solely because it was a book by a woman documenting her travel in the accepted format of letters, but it introduced new elements into an established literary form.

In contrast, Gilbert's work is not groundbreaking because the idea of women travelling is no longer a novelty and the centrality of the self and the adventures of the self are

entrenched in today's mass media popular culture. However, Gilbert uses the form in a new way: she conflates travel writing with self-help. She has been able to do so because travel books are no longer our only resource to gain knowledge of the *Other*. They have become metaphors for our contemporary quest for self; they tell the tales of our inner journeys.¹⁴

If travel writing once served as the documentary of a quest and now as a metaphor of a quest, the essence of both is still departure. In order to know what is gained through the adventure of travel, a traveller needs to have a sense of self prior to leaving. If so, how does one establish a sense of self?

Michel Foucault argues that individuals establish a sense of identify by deploying technologies of the self. In his work, Foucault was dedicated to disentangling the perception of universal human truths or experience and to identifying the historical basis upon which our understandings are based. His focus on the self versus systems characterized his later thinking and he explains this intellectual evolution as follows:

My objective for more than twenty-five years has been to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves: economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology. The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific 'truth games' related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.¹⁵

His interest in the self rather than human systems emerged because he became "more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself in the technology of self."¹⁶

In developing the notions of technologies of the self, Foucault explored two competing precepts drawn from ancient Greek philosophy: "to be concerned with oneself" (or to "take care of yourself") and to "know yourself". The former, exemplified in Plato's dialogue, *Alcibiades*, focuses on the work a person must undertake to ameliorate one's being in order to meet one's obligations as a citizen in service to the state. The latter approach, to know yourself, is what Foucault considers a misinterpretation of the

Socratic principle. In his view, this misinterpretation, which functions as a foundation of Western thought, developed largely in conjunction with the progression of Christianity. It focuses on one's weaknesses and atoning for one's shortcomings in order to seek salvation. This religiously based focus exerts undue influence, in Foucault's assessment, on the ability of individuals to be the agent of their own understanding, a sentiment echoed by Wollstonecraft who argued that "blind faith" obscured a person's ability "to acquire principles for themselves."¹⁷

In Foucault's view, "the hermeneutics of the self has been confused with theologies of the soul."¹⁸ He writes:

There has been an inversion between the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity, "Take care of yourself" and "Know thyself." In Greco-Roman culture knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of taking care of yourself. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle.¹⁹

In his view, the intrusion of Christian notions of salvation distorted the value of the Socratic principle because the religious establishment saw prioritizing the care of one's self as immoral and as an attempt to escape the rules for moral behaviour. Foucault argues that Christian morality made "self-renunciation the condition for salvation" and that this "morality of asceticism" made the self "that which one can reject."²⁰

With technologies of the self, Foucault wanted to reinstate an approach to self-understanding that sanctioned an individual's social obligation to take care of the self in order to better serve the greater good. He urged each person to assume responsibility for self-development and for pursuing whatever means one determines are necessary to achieve a certain state of being according to one's own desires.

It is a call to action, an argument for personal agency independent of judgment from external authorities regarding the effectiveness, efficacy, and applicability of one's own actions. That is, Foucault felt people ought not to rely on institutions or on organizations to tell them if they succeeded in attaining "a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" or God's grace and salvation.²¹

Both Wollstonecraft and Gilbert use writing for self-reflection, an approach central to the concept of taking care of oneself and a practice “well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions*.”²² They capture their travel experiences in narratives they wrote for public consumption and this shared intent establishes a basis for comparison. Using Foucault’s technologies of the self to provide a theoretical context for analysis is to explore the ways in which each woman, through her travels and the documentation of her travels, took care of herself and sought greater self-understanding in an effort to attain an internally desired state of being rather than an externally dictated state of grace.

Notes

- ¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 80.
- ² Ibid., 105-106.
- ³ Ibid., 53-54.
- ⁴ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43-44.
- ⁵ Ibid., 150.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and The World* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997), xi, 2-3.
- ⁸ Ibid., 11.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 2-3.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 3.
- ¹² Ibid., 15-16.
- ¹³ Ibid., 18.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 29.
- ¹⁵ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 17-18.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 19.
- ¹⁷ Wollstonecraft, Letters, 108-109.
- ¹⁸ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 17.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 22.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid., 18.
- ²² Ibid., 27.

Traveller: Mary Wollstonecraft

Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark

(1796)

“Whether I deserve to rank amongst this privileged number, my readers alone can judge — and I give them leave to shut the book, if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me.”

Pre-Boarding

Tackling the work of Mary Wollstonecraft is a daunting task given the volume of material available on her life and her work. While scholarship and study on Wollstonecraft has gone through cycles of extreme interest and relative disinterest, her reputation today is firmly ensconced as an author, a critical reviewer, a political philosopher, and an early advocate for social justice, education, equality, democracy, and women's rights.

With regard to the *Letters*, the range of interpretations is startling. In one modern collection of essays the book is examined, explored, and dissected in relation to the picturesque, visual perception in women's travel writing, modernity and traditionalism, the sublime, nature, ecological feminism and more.¹

My goal is modest: I want to see whether a reading of the *Letters* demonstrates a relationship between Wollstonecraft's journey to Scandinavia and her self-awareness. That is, does this book, which stands as a testament to her intellectual concerns, also document a greater understanding of self, which she realized through travel?

I have organized my analysis around five core issues: intention, destination, experience, engagement, and self-understanding. Before delving into each of these topics, I will look at three "pre-boarding" considerations: factors which help form an impression of the author at the point of departure. The pre-boarding factors I have prioritized are the narrative form of the work, the author's relationship to transcendence, and her sense of personal identity prior to leaving home.

Looking at these three items, in relation to Wollstonecraft's *Letters* and later in relation to Gilbert's *EPL*, shapes the sense of each woman at the embarkation point of her journey and allows, upon their returns and with an analysis of their texts, a better understanding of the distance they travelled, literally, physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Narrative Form

Prior to her departure, Wollstonecraft had secured a publishing contract and she wrote knowing that her observations and experiences would be available to the reading public (a more limited audience than the mass market of today).

Writing was the mode of expression with which Wollstonecraft was most familiar given her professional career. She was comfortable with a wide range of styles including journalism, criticism, fiction, non-fiction, magazine writing, biography, and more. She also reviewed travel books, a male-dominated field at the time, and she challenged the conventions of the genre particularly the trend of presenting travel as a compilation of miscellaneous facts, picturesque details, and road directions.² In fact, Wollstonecraft's work in the *Letters* is part of a transformative trend in travel writing, arising in the mid to late eighteenth century, where the connection between the traveller, one's personality, and the world became more obvious in published books.³

Wollstonecraft chose to write about her travel experiences in a more intimate style, which heightened the connection between her and her readers, by incorporating more of her personality in the work. This personal perspective, the "I", allows Wollstonecraft to show herself as more than an author and an intellectual and to do so in a modern way.⁴

Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, in their introduction to the *Letters*, explain:

[Wollstonecraft's] contemporaries were themselves eager to read the book in terms of the access it gave them to what was perceived as her personality and feelings.

Partly this response was itself predicated on the idea, developed further by [William] Godwin, that the book did represent a reorientation from masculine questions of politics and philosophy in the vindications [*A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)] to a language rooted in the affections.⁵

Wollstonecraft had always presented herself as a person of reason capable of tackling the most masculine of topics and in the *Letters* she also presented herself as a woman of passion. Wollstonecraft's ability to forge a bond with her readers was so successful that Godwin, her future husband, wrote, "If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book."⁶

Wollstonecraft shared much with her readers, yet edited her text for publication, which entailed a measure of self-censorship and concealment. Access to her private letters allows readers to compare and contrast her public and private personas. For example, in one of her private letters from Scandinavia she wrote about her desire for love and commented on her physical and mental state after childbirth. She lamented that “despair ... has rendered me stupid — soul and body seemed to be fading away before the withering touch of disappointment.”⁷ The emotionality of this assessment contrasts with the more restrained tone of self-reflection in a published letter where she notes that “my imprudence last winter, and some untoward accidents just at the time I was weaning my child, had reduced me to a state of weakness which I never before experienced.”⁸

The incorporation of the “I” in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* reflects the connection between writing and self-understanding that Foucault presents in his essay on the technologies of the self. He specified that particular forms of expression emerged to reflect a new concern with *self* and new experiences of *selfhood*: “[A] relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing.”⁹

If, as Foucault argues, writing supports an experience of self, then Wollstonecraft’s choice to write and publish her *Letters* reflected an exploration of self within the context of her time. That is, she may not have been writing — or travelling — as a path to self-improvement, but she was using writing as a way to broaden her self-awareness and self-understanding. Writing, for Wollstonecraft, was an exercise of reason and “from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow.”¹⁰

Wollstonecraft documented her travels in the form of letters although it was not a form that characterized the body of her public work. In the view of Janet Todd, a Wollstonecraft biographer, it is the mode which best exemplified her personality:

[Wollstonecraft’s] voice is most insistent in her letters, which she wrote as child, daughter, companion, friend, teacher, governess, sister, literary hack, author, lover and wife. She talks and thinks on paper, using it as therapy, occasionally for self-mastery. She writes on the move, in boats, in remote Swedish inns, in freezing revolutionary Paris, before plunging suicidally into the Thames, and after her rescue. She dedicates herself to expressing her Self.¹¹

This interpretation characterizes Wollstonecraft as obsessive and self-involved, but her use of letters is more than simply a vehicle in which she most comfortably housed her voice. Godwin uses the word “calculated” and I believe Wollstonecraft’s use of letters was deliberate for what the form meant to her audience.

In Wollstonecraft’s letters, readers saw echoes of the missives they were accustomed to receiving, as friends and family, about the adventures or misadventures of those who travelled abroad. As Brian Dolan notes in his book *Ladies of the Grand Tour*, letters from abroad were cherished for the intimacy they created between the traveller and those back home. They “generated the most widely received views of foreign travel in the eighteenth century” and they were particularly important for women because, as Dolan explains:

[T]he art of letter writing was an essential part of a well-born education, creating a literary legacy was a central element to the Grand Tour. Without this the history of the ladies of the Grand Tour would have been lost... Such letters made seductive reading for the fireside voyagers who, from the familiar surrounds of their own home, followed the path of their own foreign correspondent.¹²

Wollstonecraft’s letters provided readers with evidence of her education and they were “seductive reading”, for those who were not travelling or were not travellers, about her experiences in foreign places. She also used the audience’s familiarity with letters and readers’ pleasure in the genre to counterbalance the fact she was dealing with topics which society did not commonly accept as being women’s concerns. She used letters as a mechanism for seeking understanding, validation, and acceptance for her controversial ideas and notions. By using a universally accepted form, Wollstonecraft invited her readers into a less-threatening forum to contemplate her stinging critique of the emerging economic and social order she observed in the countries she visited and, more pertinently, at home.

Letters also allowed Wollstonecraft to use the pronoun *you* to establish a relationship with her readers. It is a pronoun she used to address the world and not only Gilbert Imlay, the addressee in her private letters.¹³

If today's readers see the letters from Scandinavia as addressed only to Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft's lover and the father of her first child, then the temptation is to read the text as letters home from a woman with a broken heart. However, this interpretation overemphasizes the personal-private nature of the account and obscures the substance of her philosophical critique.

Wollstonecraft's "*you*" is used to break through the private-public divide to address all readers and to address each reader directly. "*You*" implies intimacy and Wollstonecraft's use of it strengthened the authority of her voice because she engaged in a conversation with each reader as a friend or an acquaintance. This sense of intimacy was enhanced by her decision to capture a more natural feeling in her work. She explained it this way:

[A]s I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained, as I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh.¹⁴

That is, she planned to write about what she saw and did, but more importantly she decided to include her reactions to what she observed and details about what she felt. Wollstonecraft invited readers to be present in the moment with her and to empathize with what she was saying. Her emphasis was on sensory observation in addition to intellectual analysis all in an attempt to be truthful. By testifying to her struggles with her feelings she was also testifying to the knowledge she had gained through her experiences, a process which would help her become a more virtuous person.

While Wollstonecraft shared this process of gaining knowledge with her readers, she also showed her interest in a wide range of topics and reinforced the importance of inquiry by asking questions no matter how seemingly trivial the topic. For example, on the topic of sea monsters, she wrote:

I almost forgot to tell you, that I did not leave Norway without making some inquiries after the monsters said to have been seen in the northern sea; but though I conversed with several captains, I could not meet with one who had ever heard any traditional description of them, much less had any ocular demonstration of their existence. Till the fact be better ascertained, I should think the account of them ought to be torn out of our Geographical Grammars.¹⁵

Wollstonecraft's efforts to disprove superstitions and myths, such as that of the sea monsters, also reflected her belief in rationality and reason as the foundation for education. By being meticulous in reporting such details, she demonstrated what was important and she also demonstrated that a woman was capable of distinguishing between fact and fiction. Wollstonecraft's choice of form facilitated this focus on the verification of facts because letters were accounts from a trusted friend; eyewitness statements the reader would accept as truthful.

She was always conscious of her roles as scholar, philosopher, journalist, social critic, and feminist. She was overt and persistent in pursuing her own agenda, whether that was a veiled plea to the man she loved for empathy or a call for the betterment of humankind or a comment on current affairs. As Brekke and Mee note, "the book is not simply autobiographical, not simply about her personal situation, but also a reflection on the responsiveness of human beings — with the emphasis very much on the situation of women — to their emotional and historical surroundings."¹⁶

Wollstonecraft knew the core group of readers for her work would be the circle of intellectuals and educated readers with knowledge of her reputation and her writing. Readers in London may have been those she knew personally or with whom she had a passing acquaintanceship. In light of this familiarity with her audience, it is not surprising that she addressed issues known to be of interest to her and in a fashion that reflected her views such as the morals and manners approach to historical change.¹⁷

Her use of letters and the new way in which she wrote of her travels was her attempt to reach beyond the immediate circle of readers because her underlying desire was for change. Her letters were an experiment in creating awareness about the trends in society which she thought would imperil the drive towards a more enlightened, a more reasoned, world.

Given the context of her time and her nature as well as her philosophical ideals and world view, Wollstonecraft used her *Letters* to reach the *you*, the people who would advocate, support, engineer, and implement change. In other words, she wrote for people in positions of power and for the people who influenced them.

Relationship to Transcendence

Wollstonecraft's journey was a business mission. She was investigating a missing shipment of silver on behalf of Imlay and she was writing to fulfill the terms of her publishing contract. However, Wollstonecraft also documented her experiences of transcendence by discussing her adventures in nature and including her reflections on existential matters. While a search for spirituality was not Wollstonecraft's motivation for travelling, her relationship to transcendence becomes a point of comparison with Elizabeth Gilbert who purposefully included a search for God in her journey abroad.

Wollstonecraft was born into a Christian family and into a society which was primarily of the same faith, that of the Church of England. As she grew and matured she began to question her household's beliefs and found the religion of her youth unsatisfactory. The chasm between the spiritual environment into which she was born and her questioning nature, combined with the challenges of her early life, encouraged Wollstonecraft to explore alternatives.

In her search for a community of belief, Wollstonecraft connected with progressive nonconformists such as the minister Dr. Richard Price and his circle, an affiliation that gave her a new way to practice and express her faith. It also nurtured her interest in social change, exposed her to notions of advocacy, and reinforced her interest in social justice issues.¹⁸ Her exposure to this way of thinking and this way of agitating helped her gain confidence in herself and in her writing.

More engaged with Dissenters than with traditionalists, Wollstonecraft shared concerns about the impact of religion on the willingness of people to exercise their own reason. She makes statements such as "aristocracy and fanaticism seem equally to be gaining ground in England" and she was eager to "stop the progress of Methodism."¹⁹

She describes her alarm as follows:

I was surprised when I visited Yorkshire, in my way to Sweden, to find that sullen narrowness of thinking had made such a progress since I was an inhabitant of the country... [M]any of these deluded people, with the best meaning, actually lose their reason, and become miserable, the dread of damnation throwing them into a state which merits the term: and

still more, in running after their preachers, expecting to promote their salvation, they disregard their welfare in this world, and neglect the interest and comfort of their families: so that in proportion as they attain a reputation for piety, they become idle.²⁰

Wollstonecraft's convictions were rooted in the belief of rationality as a foundation for thought even, or maybe especially, in matters of faith. She was troubled by the power of religion to distract people from the application of their own reason and to focus their attention on salvation rather than their welfare in this world.

In his essay on the technologies of the self, Foucault attributed the focus on salvation, which Wollstonecraft criticized, to the impact of Christianity on changing notions and conceptions of the self. He wrote: "We inherit the tradition of Christian morality which makes self-renunciation the condition for salvation. To know oneself was paradoxically the way to self-renunciation."²¹

If the basis for salvation in the Christian tradition is self-renunciation, it's a tenet with which Wollstonecraft struggled. She attempted to recapture, reassert, and celebrate the primacy of knowledge not for any afterlife promises bestowed by a benevolent creator, but because she felt it shaped human efforts to be more virtuous and to make things better for one's self, one's family, one's community, one's nation, and the world. With her perception that the application of reason was lacking at home and driven by her need for knowledge, Wollstonecraft used travel to seek evidence and proof elsewhere to support her controversial ideas and her own personal development.

While Wollstonecraft had a dim view of the effect religion had on the application of reason, she did not disavow the notion of God. Her view of the world and existence included a power greater than man. It was a force she appeared to see primarily in nature and in the way the human ability to feel and to think served as a guide into knowing and belief.²²

To her, the evidence of the divine was in the mere fact of being alive:

Whilst men have senses, whatever soothes them lends wings to devotion; else why do the beauties of nature, where all that charm them are spread around with a lavish hand, force even the sorrowing heart to acknowledge

that existence is a blessing; and this acknowledgement is the most sublime homage we can pay to the Deity.²³

For Wollstonecraft, there was a Deity although her understanding of what or whom that Deity encompassed changed as her philosophical views evolved. In biographer Janet Todd's estimation Wollstonecraft had evolved in her thinking from an "individualistic religion" to adopting "political theories of rights which accepted the value of a personal self." Wollstonecraft's spiritual longing pushed her away from "a firm belief in a particular biblical God" and she found "selfhood primarily in time and imaginative narrative."²⁴

Wollstonecraft explored issues of belief and rationality and she also explored the connection between the mind and the body. Her concern with this relationship became more vivid as a result of her contemplation of mortality, something with which she was keenly familiar given the deaths of many who figured prominently in her life including her mother and her best friend. She searched for a vocabulary by which to explore the ways these aspects of being were intertwined. In her initial impressions of Swedish society, for example, she wrote, "in some degree I term every person idle, the exercise of whose mind does not bear some proportion to that of the body" before launching into a critique of the women whom she felt exercised "neither sufficiently."²⁵

With regard to her own physicality, Wollstonecraft saw that her body carried the trauma of her disappointments and personal crises. The unhygienic environments and practices of her time were factors with which she had to contend. She herself was fastidious and forward thinking with regard to issues such as exercise, nursing, and dress for children. She shows this in her comments on child rearing in Sweden:

A mistaken tenderness, however, for their children, makes them, even in summer, load them with flannels; and, having a sort of natural antipathy to cold water, the squalid appearance of the poor babes, not to speak of the noxious smell which flannel and rugs retain, seems a reply to a question I had often asked — Why I did not see more children in the villages I passed through? Indeed the children appear to be nipt in the bud, having neither the graces nor charms of their age. And this, I am persuaded, is much more owing to the ignorance of the mothers than to the rudeness of the climate.²⁶

Wollstonecraft's conception of the Divine had expanded beyond traditionalism and she was intrigued by the entirety of the human experience. Whatever her notions about spirituality and physicality may have been, or however they evolved, her relationship to transcendence formed part of her personal identity.

Identity At Takeoff

Wollstonecraft's state of mind and her way of being in the world had a bearing on the way in which she approached her travels and on the legacy of her experiences abroad. She lived on the periphery as someone outside looking in and someone who strove to assert the value of her own voice. She wrote in the *Letters*, "Cassandra was not the only prophetess whose warning voice has been disregarded."²⁷ In her self-identification with that tragic figure of Ancient Greece she acknowledged her own fight for recognition.

Her fight to be heeded began at a young age as a member of an unsettled family, one that was always on the move, physically and socially as their financial circumstances spiraled downwards. She was the eldest in a family of seven children with an Irish mother and an English father who was temperamental and abusive. As the eldest daughter, she assumed much of the responsibility for her brothers and her sisters. She found it difficult to secure her economic livelihood as a writer and she struggled to sustain any position she obtained.²⁸

Reflecting her tenuous circumstances, Wollstonecraft searched to cultivate a sense of belonging and rootedness. She often dwelt on the social and financial difficulties she and her family experienced and reflected upon their disappointed hopes and dreams. In her biography of the author Janet Todd sees a woman enveloped in unrelenting melancholy:

Clearly a depressive, even manic depressive, tendency existed in the Wollstonecraft family, there already in the passive mother and volatile father, whose moods could swing violently from hatred to fondness... But there was also a cultural component in their malady; the high esteem in which the middle classes held melancholy in the eighteenth century... Mary's catalogue of miseries eased her heart and created her in the softened feminine character of the middle-class ideal, in her case still resolutely pious.²⁹

With this intense focus on her individual needs, Wollstonecraft also fought to have a different life than that of her mother, Elizabeth. She saw in her mother a submissive woman, a meek woman of little sense, who had no choice but to abide the temper of a domineering man, a man who often failed to provide for the needs of his family.³⁰ She was expected to nurse her mother through a difficult illness and she moved back home to do so. The burden of care for her mother strained their relationship further and Elizabeth, after her death, “would live for Mary mainly as a lamentable example.”³¹ Wollstonecraft wanted to evade her mother’s fate of stagnant domesticity and searched for a life that would allow her to escape a similar destiny.

This conflict was exacerbated by Wollstonecraft’s gloomy views on the social outlook for women in general. In a letter from Norway she wrote about her fears for her daughter:

I feel more than a mother’s fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard - I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit - Hapless woman! what a fate is thine!³²

She was uncannily prescient because her daughter Fanny succeeded where Wollstonecraft had failed in two attempts. Fanny committed suicide at twenty-two.

Wollstonecraft’s journey through life was fraught with difficulty because conventionality was a societal norm for women and she was not suited to being conventional. She pursued a variety of careers and placements. She ran a school for girls, she served as a lady’s companion, and she worked as a governess as she sought to find a career that suited her needs, her temperament, and her wants. None endured.

After being dismissed from her position as governess for the children of Lord and Lady Kingsborough, Wollstonecraft set out for London and sought the help of publisher Joseph Johnson. In their discussions, they agreed that there were alternatives for a woman who was literate and articulate, but they were risky. Wollstonecraft embraced the risk and chose to pursue “a literary living in London.” Johnson agreed to assist her.³³

Wollstonecraft found a circle in which she could operate as an independent woman. Her interests began to broaden beyond the concerns of her early work and exceeded the world of typical women's concerns. She drifted from being "primarily an educational writer, an interest that never left her, ... towards the political events of her time."³⁴ Her character never corresponded to the mould of femininity and in a letter from Scandinavia she wrote, "at supper my host told me bluntly that I was a woman of observation, for I asked him *men's questions*."³⁵

Her interest in world events eventually led her to Paris. Wollstonecraft travelled there in 1792 to witness the impact of the revolution first hand. In one of the critical moments of her life, she met Gilbert Imlay, a businessman and author from America, with whom she began an affair.³⁶ Wollstonecraft became pregnant and her daughter, Fanny, was born in Le Havre in 1794. The birth of Fanny did not rescue the tumultuous affair in which Wollstonecraft had engaged. When she returned to London, Wollstonecraft was unable to deal with the devastation she felt about the end of her relationship with Imlay and she attempted suicide for the first time in 1795.

Upon her recovery, and in an attempt to repair her health, her life, and her prospect for love, Wollstonecraft agreed to the business commission which entailed travelling to Scandinavia. In setting out her credentials to write about the experiences she knew she would be sharing publicly, Wollstonecraft was careful to emphasize her integrity:

I think I may be permitted, in a strange country, without any breach of modesty, to assert that my character as a moral writer is too well established for any one to suspect that I would condescend to gloss over the truth, or to anything like subterfuge, even in my own cause.³⁷

She conveniently overlooked that she had engaged in personal subterfuge by identifying Imlay as her husband; they were never married. However, Wollstonecraft had to be discreet with details about her personal life. She concealed information, even though she embraced an unconventional lifestyle, to avoid societal stigma, the threat of which was very real. After her marriage to William Godwin in 1797, "some of their 'respectable' friends, the actress Sarah Siddons and novelist and playwright Elizabeth Inchbald among them, withdrew from their social circle on discovering that Wollstonecraft had never been Mrs Imlay, and that Fanny was illegitimate."³⁸

She was also conscientious about what she shared publicly in order to make sure her concerns were heard and not dismissed on the grounds of perceived impropriety.

Despite the inherent difficulties in travelling, Wollstonecraft persevered. Travel afforded her the opportunity to write, to seek solace in being away from her troubles, and to assert her independence. She was free to determine the amount of risk she accepted and in doing so she challenged the notion that a woman's only interest was in safety and security. Her decision to travel contradicted her need for belonging in that it implies rootlessness rather than rootedness, but for Wollstonecraft belonging would not come at the cost of ceding control over her life.

In the *Letters*, this willingness to assume risk is evident. Wollstonecraft wrote about her ability to cope with difficult situations and to be resolute in frightening situations. "The sea was boisterous;" she wrote, "but, as I had an experienced pilot, I did not apprehend any danger. Sometimes I was told, boats are driven far out and lost. However, I seldom calculate chances so nicely — sufficient for the day is the obvious evil!"³⁹

She showed that as a woman she was capable of managing the challenges of travel as well as any man whether those challenges involved the seas, ship pilots, horses, and more. She also boasted that "I enter a boat with the same indifference as I change horses; and as for danger, come when it may, I dread it not sufficiently to have any anticipating fears."⁴⁰

This fearlessness was an essential character attribute and an asset. Wollstonecraft travelled at a time when women did not typically travel by themselves. She travelled at a time marked by the threat of war, the legacy of which was evident in the number of French émigrés she encountered once she arrived in Hamburg and at the end of her trip when she altered plans and headed back to England. While not the only reason for her decision to return, "the presence of the French army would have rendered my intended tour through Germany, in my way to Switzerland, almost impracticable, had not the advancing season obliged me to alter my plan."⁴¹

At the time of her trip to Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft was, despite her manifest accomplishments and achievements, broken in spirit. She was dealing with the

disastrous consequences of a failed relationship and the reality of providing for and caring for her baby daughter. In a private letter to Imlay shortly after arriving in Sweden, she wrote:

My friend — my friend, I am not well — a deadly weight of sorrow lies heavily on my heart. I am again tossed on the troubled billows of life; and obliged to cope with difficulties, without being buoyed up by the hopes that alone render them bearable. 'How flat, dull, and unprofitable,' appears to me all the bustle into which I see people here so eagerly enter! I long every night to go to bed, to hide my melancholy face in my pillow; but there is a canker-worm in my bosom that never sleeps.⁴²

Wollstonecraft left London, in part, to escape the depression and melancholy that had consumed her there. If the trip north were intended to escape those woes, it was not initially successful in doing so.

The business commission from Imlay and the lure of gaining knowledge through a travel encounter with the *Other*, gave Wollstonecraft a chance to move beyond her sorrow. It was also an opportunity for her to engage in a process of self-reflection and to reduce her reliance on others to define who she was whether professionally or personally. Her disregard for convention, her willingness to take risks, her belief that what she had to say about the world would be of interest to the public, and her need for economic self-sufficiency were other factors which launched her on this quest. The alternative — to do nothing new — would have been untenable. It would have been to give up on life.

Notes

- ¹ Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, eds, *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays, Stockholm Studies in English*, XCIX (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003).
- ² Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, introduction to *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, ed. Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, *Stockholm Studies in English* XCIX (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 9-10.
- ³ Blanton, *Travel Writing*, 14.
- ⁴ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft - A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000) ix.
- ⁵ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xxiii.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.
- ⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 142.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ⁹ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 28.
- ¹⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 11.
- ¹¹ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, ix.
- ¹² Brian Dolan, *Ladies of the Grand Tour: British Women in Pursuit of Enlightenment and Adventure in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 29-30.
- ¹³ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xxiii.
- ¹⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 3.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ¹⁶ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, ix.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.
- ¹⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 60, 59.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-60.
- ²¹ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 22.
- ²² Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 111.
- ²³ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 84.
- ²⁴ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 324.
- ²⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 23.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.
- ²⁸ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, ix-x.

- ²⁹ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 74-75.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 37-40.
- ³² Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 36.
- ³³ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 117.
- ³⁴ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xi.
- ³⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 11. The editors' note describes these "men's questions" as "factual questions about social, political, and economic matters that were presumed to be beyond the ken of a woman."
- ³⁶ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xii.
- ³⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 137.
- ³⁸ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xiii.
- ³⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 35.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 141.

On the Road

With this brief survey of what I have called pre-boarding factors, I have drawn a sketch of Wollstonecraft as she prepared to leave for Scandinavia in 1795. I will now delve into my examination of the *Letters* which I have arranged into five compartments: intention, why she chose to travel; destination, why she chose Scandinavia; experience, what she did as she travelled; engagement, how she interacted with the people she met while travelling; and self-learning, what impact the journey had on her.

Intention

Wollstonecraft's decision to travel on her own was unusual which reflects more on the gap in the historical record than on the actual experience of women travellers. The history of women and travel extends back to the early Christian era and one of the first known travel accounts by a woman is Egeria's journal from 381 CE.¹ Wollstonecraft's exploits as a traveller are notable because she predates the explosion of women adventurers that came later with the growth of the British Empire and the expeditions of the Victorian and Edwardian eras.

In Wollstonecraft's era, society viewed travel, particularly in the form of The Grand Tour, as a social conditioning instrument by which to prepare young men for their future. The Grand Tour completed a young man's education before he assumed his role in society. Dennis Porter characterizes it as a moral, literary, and educational complement to the theoretical knowledge one gained from classical instruction. As Porter summarizes:

From the point of view of society, the grand tour can be seen to be an instrument of social reproduction. And from the point of view of the individual, it has the character of a rite of passage following upon which one accepts the responsibilities of the well-born male to family, class, and nation. One prepared for the time when one would assume one's father's place.²

In the male-dominant patriarchy of England, young men were sent overseas to experience life amongst the *Other*, seemingly free of duty, responsibility, and

accountability before coming home to assume the mantle of duty, responsibility, and accountability to their families, their station in life, and their nation.

Society denied young women the same opportunity because the understanding of a woman's role in society and in life, let alone an appreciation of her abilities and skills, was myopic and confining. Women with education developed their skills in private settings to avoid the ridicule they faced if they attempted to make incursions into the male world of intellectual concerns. As Brian Dolan concludes:

The road to enlightened improvement for men was expected to involve university education and continental travel; for women, it involved bible study and childrearing. Women were educated and raised to be companions, not connoisseurs; they were ideally suited to complement men, not compete with them.³

In reaction to this restrictive vision of womanhood, women had begun to co-opt the socially accepted tradition of The Grand Tour. That is, women, particularly women from a higher socio-economic class, began to travel in spite of society and for their own purposes.⁴ They travelled to soothe away personal unhappiness, to seek freedom and enlightenment, to defy sexual conventions,⁵ and to instigate changes at home.⁵

Wollstonecraft seized opportunities to travel because it was one way to broaden the scope of her learning, much of which she had been responsible for from an early age. More fundamentally, her travel intent was shaped by a desire for freedom, intellectual curiosity, and economic necessity. These goals made her a purposeful traveller and not an aimless wanderer: she embarked on a specific journey with specific objectives and did so with the idea of returning to London.

In her preface to the *Letters*, the "Advertisement," Wollstonecraft glossed over the rarity of her experience and situated her work within the genre of travel writing to which her readers were accustomed. "The writing travels, or memoirs," she wrote, "has ever been a pleasant employment; for vanity or sensibility always renders it interesting."⁶ In effect, she normalized her experience for readers.

She also did not specifically address the circumstances that led to her departure in the *Letters*. Rather, she focused on her exhaustion at the beginning of her journey:

Eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers have so exhausted my spirits, to say nothing of the other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted, that it is with some difficulty I adhere to my determination of giving you my observations, as I travel through new scenes, whilst warmed with the impression they have made on me.⁷

By assuming her readers knew the facts about her life, Wollstonecraft saw no reason to divulge them and did not publicly reveal that she had accepted a commission to investigate Imlay's failed business venture. She maintained an air of mystery by taking readers into her confidence, concealing the details, and leaving them to wonder what else there was to know.

Wollstonecraft clearly had her own ideas about why she chose to travel. This is reflected in a private letter to the Danish Prime Minister in which she emphasized her interests and her wishes more than Imlay's commission. "I, therefore," she wrote, "wishing to have an opportunity of writing an account of the present state of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, determined to undertake the business, being fully acquainted with all the circumstances."⁸

In other words, Wollstonecraft wanted to do her own research and to write her own account to satisfy her own intellectual curiosity. Travel allowed her to see things with her own eyes and to write about travelling in a new way. This emphasis on seeing was characteristic of her time. To see had become the means by which to ascertain and verify truths and assertions in intellectual pursuits.⁹

This drive to see allowed Wollstonecraft to process information on a first-hand basis and placed the emphasis on objective observation. As a result, Wollstonecraft's reliance on the visual contributed to her distance from the *Other*. It influenced the choices she made in deciding what to share about people, places, and events, which in effect heightened the subjectivity of her work.¹⁰

Wollstonecraft identified her original intent in writing about her trip to Scandinavia as "simply to endeavour to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through."¹¹ She also expected her readers would "become better acquainted with" her because of the personal tone she adopted and her willingness to detail her

inner thoughts and feelings as she described her experiences. This does not mean that she shared everything she observed. She ended her first letter in the collection, for example, in a dismissive tone writing, “as nothing passed at this supper to characterize the country, I shall here close my letter.”¹² The details of the company, the meal, and the gowns may have entranced some of her readers, but these quotidian matters were not always of interest to her.

Wollstonecraft ensured readers were aware of her stated objective of social analysis. She also indicated limits to her willingness to go into further detail about either her external environment or her inner journey. What she included depended on her own assessment of the value of what she had seen or heard or encountered. Her discretion was applied to her experiences and she related only those which offered insights into the country she was visiting and its development whether she assessed that in terms of people, politics, social organization, customs, manners, or landscape.

Wollstonecraft searched for truth on a more universal scale and she often examined the evidence through a lens of despair. Her primary concern was not in relation to her individual self, but in relation to humankind. She wondered whether people only pretended to be virtuous and whether there was generally a paucity of self-respect.¹³ She tried to excuse her despair as “the vapourings of a heart ill at ease — the effusions of a sensibility wounded almost to madness” and she contrasted her current melancholy with her hope for “another state of existence — where truth and justice will reign.”¹⁴ In referring to this other state of existence, Wollstonecraft demonstrated her belief in the possibility of change and in a different experience for humanity that rested on principles she prized.

Wollstonecraft also sought to better understand her intimate relationships and this subtext underlies her journey. Despite her statements regarding her interests in the region, the unstated objective for her consent to travel was likely enmeshed with her desire to recapture Imlay’s love. In the *Letters*, she vacillates between asserting her independence and her hope for change and her dependence and need to return to a previous state of entanglement. The pathos of her yearning is evident in many letters and in haunting statements as when she writes, “Thinking of death makes us tenderly

cling to our affections — with more than usual tenderness, I therefore assure you that I am your's, wishing that the temporary death of absence may not endure longer than is absolutely necessary.”¹⁵

While love may have been her personal motivation, Wollstonecraft allocated time to pursue Imlay's case and she focused her observations on what had the potential to transform society for the better. Her efforts with regard to physical care denoted concern with self, too, and she also explored questions of virtue and morality. She deplored the negative consequences of idleness and the emphasis on trivialities that she felt narrowed the mind. In her view, respect for the virtues was paramount, but not the virtues of convention. Civilization and societal norms threatened one's individuality and as she explained:

Mixing with mankind, we are obliged to examine our prejudices, and often imperceptibly lose, as we analyze them. And in the country, growing intimate with nature, a thousand little circumstances, unseen by vulgar eyes, give birth to sentiments dear to the imagination, and inquiries which expand the soul, particularly when cultivation has not smoothed into insipidity all its originality of character.¹⁶

Throughout the *Letters*, Wollstonecraft pushed to expand and expound upon her knowledge of the world, of human nature, and “for the improvement and understanding of the heart” including, and perhaps most particularly, her own.¹⁷ These principles, as much as the business mission she accepted, influenced the decisions she made regarding her travel destinations.

Destination

Business dictated Wollstonecraft's itinerary in Scandinavia. There were specific people she had to meet in particular places. Her stops can be categorized as destinations of compulsion rather than destinations of choice, or places she had to go rather than places she wanted to go. This is particularly true because in general “the English literary traveller went south, took some portion of the Grand Tour of France, Italy and the Rhine parts of Germany and Switzerland. The Baltic states were largely unvisited except for business or diplomacy.”¹⁸ She occasionally altered her schedule for sightseeing purposes or to adjust to the vagaries of inclement weather and logistical inconveniences.

Given Wollstonecraft's curiosity and the scope of her intellectual pursuits, it seems likely her interest in travelling to Scandinavia entailed more than satisfying the requirements of the business commission she had accepted. The region, which was not usually found on the itinerary of the casual traveller or of a Grand Tour participant, piqued her interest because she saw in the northern countries a place where she assumed commercial and cultural development lagged that of southern Europe.

To Wollstonecraft, the region was a social laboratory. She expected nothing of value from the region. It was an opinion that reflected a popular eighteenth century fiction about Scandinavia.¹⁹ She welcomed the opportunity to travel north in order to investigate whether her ideas, hopes, and dreams of the potential of human society held merit in an environment where civilized society, as she knew it, had not yet fully flourished. In this view of Scandinavia as a place of potentiality, Wollstonecraft assumed the mantle of a Promethean figure reinforcing the notion that civilization ran from the Titan-like enlightened South to the chilled climes of the human-like North.²⁰

Wollstonecraft characterized the region as one in the early stages of political and civic development. In Norway, for example, she wrote that the people appeared to be shrewd, but "with little scientific knowledge and still less taste for literature."²¹ She also felt that Norwegians focused only on their families and that their public spirit had not yet developed fully.

Her comment about the Norwegian public spirit was dismissive and yet Wollstonecraft indicated hope for the society's eventual enlightenment. She imagined that civilization would progress in stages and that social change would depend on "opening the understanding" of the people.²² Wollstonecraft's hope for the future of the untamed vastness was expansive. As Anka Ryall notes, it "endows her northern landscapes and organisms with an almost emancipatory potential that is analogous to her feminist vision of social change and personal empowerment."²³

Wollstonecraft's experiences in Paris during the aftermath of the French Revolution contributed to the development of her longing northward gaze. While the Parisian revolutionaries had forged the reinvention of French society on the foundation of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, "the thing made had now turned rather savagely against its many

makers [and] naturally precipitated a crisis of belief among the Revolution's staunchest defenders."²⁴

Early in the *Letters*, Wollstonecraft remarked on the contrast between her enjoyment of the scenery and her memories of Paris:

How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart.²⁵

She had believed in the promise of the Revolution and the overthrow of the *ancien regime*. She was deeply troubled by "the horrors" she "had witnessed," as were many other progressive thinkers, and by the terror which followed the initial jubilation of revolutionary success.

Scandinavia's reputation for rugged beauty had sparked Wollstonecraft's imagination and lured her to the region. Once there, she often described the connection she felt to the natural environment. These moments of connection were her personal experience of the sublime.²⁶ She also expressed her experience of transcendent mystery in terms of peace, the search for peace, and the need for peace. She felt more alive as she experienced nature in the Norwegian wilderness where "spirits unseen seemed to walk abroad, and flit from cliff to cliff."²⁷

This trip offered Wollstonecraft hope for the future on a personal level. It also offered her hope on a more universal scale. She saw the potential for the developing nations she visited to avoid the injustices and inequalities inherent in southern European civilization. Scandinavia was a place that she thought might yet realize the revolutionary ideals of France without the disappointment of the subsequent terror. In summary, Wollstonecraft travelled there not only for business reasons but because she wanted to as an intellectual, a philosopher, a social prognosticator, a travel writer, and a woman reflecting on her own life experiences.

Experience

This review of Wollstonecraft's travel experiences will not be an exhaustive catalogue of events or a laundry list of people she met. It is a representative selection of things she did while travelling: moments in which she reflected upon her life, considered her thoughts and feelings, contemplated her new surroundings, and addressed her hopes for the future.

In recounting her experiences, Wollstonecraft was judicious in the language she used to project an image of herself as strong, rational, and self-sufficient. She valued such attributes and knew they were characteristics which society did not typically associate with women. She wanted to show what it meant to be a woman of reason in the world because she believed a social organization predicated on gender distinctions was neither ideal nor sustainable. She wanted individuals to be valued for the ways they thought, acted, and behaved, not for their gender.

Wollstonecraft's experiences of the sublime while travelling through Scandinavia are notable. For such moments of transcendence in which she recognized the force of the Divine, she neither relied on an ideal construct of God nor on a feeling of communion with God. She relied on her reactions to the natural surroundings, the emotions that her experiences of nature evoked, and the sensations they elicited. Her narrative is filled with evocative descriptions such as this one of a landscape at twilight:

The cow's bell has ceased to tinkle the herd to rest; they have all paced across the heath. Is not this the witching time of night? The waters murmur, and fall with more than mortal music, and spirits of peace walk abroad to calm the agitated breast. Eternity is in these moments: worldly cares melt into the airy stuff that dreams are made of; and reveries, mild and enchanting as the first hopes of love, or the recollection of lost enjoyment, carry the hapless wight into futurity, who, in bustling life, has vainly strove to throw off the grief which lies heavy at the heart. Good night! A crescent hangs out in the vault before, which woos me to stray abroad: - it is not a silvery reflection of the sun, but glows with all its golden splendour. Who fears the falling dew? It only makes the mown grass smell more fragrant.²⁸

She appreciated the visible phenomena of nature that lifted her spirits or agitated them and which sometimes rendered her melancholic. Her struggle to reconcile hope and

grief, promise and disappointment, life and death are threads running through her work. Even in moments when her outlook brightened, her happiness was muted. She wrote, on her way back to Sweden from Norway: “New-born hopes seemed, like the rainbow, to appear in the clouds of sorrow, faint, yet sufficient to amuse away despair.”²⁹

Her newborn hopes helped to amuse away despair but they did not dissipate her troubles and she regarded happiness as fleeting. In another passage, she says:

Ah! let me be happy whilst I can. The tear starts as I think of it. I must fly from thought, and find refuge from sorrow in a strong imagination — the only solace for a feeling heart. Phantoms of bliss! ideal forms of excellence! again inclose me in your magic circle, and wipe clear from my remembrance the disappointments which render the sympathy painful, which experience rather increases than damps; by giving the indulgence of feeling the sanction of reason.³⁰

She sought refuge from sorrow and a way to temper her emotional state by striving to find logic in her feelings. She wanted her emotions and her passions to be sanctioned by reason believing that in this balance she would find a more satisfying way of being.

Although she was often melancholy, there are points in the *Letters* when she approached contentment and looked to the promise of the future. On a day trip into Norway from the Swedish frontier, Wollstonecraft rhapsodized:

A vague pleasurable sentiment absorbed me, as I opened my bosom to the embraces of nature; and my soul rose to its author, with the chirping of the solitary birds, which began to feel, rather than see, advancing day. I had leisure to mark its progress.³¹

But a sense of disquiet pervades Wollstonecraft’s work. This existential angst reflects a tendency on her part to veer between the dark and the light. For example, after visiting a waterfall at Fredericstadt, she wrote:

I cannot tell why — but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free — to expand in I know not what element; nay I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought, before it can be happy.

Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried by the falls into a new

train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery? Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares — grasping at immortality — it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me - I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come.³²

Wollstonecraft's occasional glimpses of a better future did not alleviate her despair entirely. Even the prospect of a reunion with her daughter, whom she had left behind in Sweden with the nursemaid, brought pangs of regret rather than joy. This is reflected in a passage where she records her impression of a peasant family making their way home from the fields:

My eyes followed them to the cottage, and an involuntary sigh whispered to my heart, that I envied the mother, much as I dislike cooking, who was preparing their pottage. I was returning to my babe, who may never experience a father's care or tenderness. The bosom that nurtured her, heaved with a pang at the thought which only an unhappy mother could feel.³³

Although Wollstonecraft acknowledged being a mother in her public letters, she kept mention of her daughter to a minimum. She likely wanted to discourage public speculation and her sense of discretion is evident elsewhere in the *Letters*. Hinting at previous troubles in one of her published letters, she wrote:

I need scarcely inform you after telling you of my walks, that my constitution has been renovated here; and that I have recovered my activity, even whilst attaining a little *embonpoint* [editors' note: well-nourished plumpness]. My imprudence last winter, and some untoward accidents just at the time I was weaning my child, had reduced me to a state of weakness which I never before experienced.³⁴

"Imprudence" and "untoward accidents" are likely references to her pregnancy and her suicide attempt and these clues likely caused readers to quizzically raise their brows in speculation. Wollstonecraft employed this veil of reticence because she recognized what her readers would consider acceptable disclosure. She respected the boundary between public and private information in her writing even if she chafed at the restrictions of propriety in other aspects of her life.

Wollstonecraft was not alone on her journey, but she was lonely. While travelling through Denmark with her child and the child's caregiver, she remarked, "Marguerite and the child often fell asleep; and when they were awake, I might still reckon myself alone, as our train of thoughts had nothing in common."³⁵ Given that she had sole responsibility for her circle of dependents, Wollstonecraft's ability to travel further or for longer was curtailed.³⁶

Although weighted down by her obligations, Wollstonecraft's travel experiences helped crystallize her understanding that she was connected to a much larger whole beyond the circle of family, friends, acquaintances, and business contacts. She visualized the interconnectedness of the world as strongly as she recognized her separateness. She noted that despite her frequent distaste for the world and her feeling that she was "a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind," her "involuntary sympathetic emotion" forced her to recognize that she was not alone.³⁷ As she described it:

[T]he attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself -- not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness!³⁸

Wollstonecraft affirmed what she saw as her calling in life, which was to contribute to the improvement of the world, through her experience of travel and writing about it. The knowledge she accrued through these experiences led to a deeper sense of self-awareness.

Engagement

If the fundamental nature of travel is an encounter with the *Other*, the way in which one engages with the *Other* reflects an individual's values and understanding of self whether the *Other* is a person, place, idea, cultural norm, or sociological practice. The impact of Wollstonecraft's time abroad on her life and her knowledge of self can only be assessed by looking at her encounters with the *Other* — the people she met, the places she visited, and the cultures she observed.

Wollstonecraft knew she would earn money from her travels to Scandinavia because her publisher had already committed to publishing the manuscript. The income would be critical to her ability to function as a financially independent woman and she was a budget-conscious traveller. She discussed costs in her public letters and was wary of being overcharged by those who might take advantage of her as a foreigner, a woman, and a non-Native speaker.

While in Scandinavia, economic necessity meant Wollstonecraft relied on her connections, the protocol of introductions, and the tradition of hospitality to find accommodation in private residences and not just at inns or other facilities. The nature of her engagement with the *Other* was dictated, in part, by the resources she had at her disposal. She relied on help to negotiate the difficulties and challenges of travel, but she was not fond of the hospitality she received. She felt that travellers had over-praised hospitality as proof of one's good intentions. In her opinion, "indiscriminate hospitality is rather a criterion by which you may form a tolerable estimate of the indolence or vacancy of a head; or, in other words, a fondness for social pleasures in which the mind not having its proportion of exercise, the bottle must be pushed about."³⁹

Wollstonecraft chafed all her life against social customs, especially the ones that had rendered women ineffectual. Travel and need were not about to render her more accepting of what she perceived to be the niceties and inanities of social gatherings.

Since she was not travelling by herself and because she had to meet the needs of her dependents even more so than her own, Wollstonecraft tolerated the company of strangers. She left England in the company of her 13-month old daughter Fanny and her daughter's French nursemaid, Marguerite, and they accompanied her as far as Gothenburg. Wollstonecraft then entrusted them to the care of Imlay's business associate for what amounted to several weeks as she travelled to Norway. Even though they stayed behind in Sweden, Wollstonecraft had to consider the impact of what she did through the lens of her responsibility for them.

Necessity largely dictated the connections that Wollstonecraft made. That is, the people around her were central to her ability to get around or they were people she had to see in the course of carrying out her business commission. She was neither helpless nor

meeke. She demonstrated her resourcefulness by writing about securing the services she needed and dealing with the contingencies of travel.

She wrote about the people she met as generic figures and anonymous, whether pretty girls from notable families, inn hosts and hostesses, lawmakers, ship pilots, servants, horsemen, or the town's elite. The individuals are often presented as stereotypes reflecting, or in support of, opinions she already held. For example, she revealed her disdain for lawyers in a description of a meeting she attended in Laurvig. She saw them as "deformed by vice" because their profession "renders a set of men still shrewder and more selfish than the rest; and it is these men, whose wits have been sharpened by knavery, who here undermine morality, confounding right and wrong."⁴⁰

Readers do not get to know these people in depth or as individuals. This reflects the brevity of Wollstonecraft's encounters while travelling, the superficial nature of the associations she made, and the fact that many of these connections were not likely to be lasting ones. She shared what she thought about the work they did and the contribution they made to society whether as individuals or as members of a profession. To Wollstonecraft, for example, these lawyers were "locusts."⁴¹

Despite revealing little about the people she met or interacted with as individuals, Wollstonecraft was unceasingly critical. For example, when she had difficulty in exchanging horses while in transit, she lashed out: "Nothing, indeed, can equal the stupid obstinacy of some of these half alive beings, who seem to have been made by Prometheus, when the fire he stole from Heaven was so exhausted, that he could only spare a spark to give life, not animation, to the inert clay."⁴² She de-individualized the people with whom she dealt and she displayed her class consciousness. "I must own to you," she said, "that the lower class of people here amuse and interest me much more than the middling, with their apish good breeding and prejudices."⁴³

As a traveller and as a woman engaged in a business matter, Wollstonecraft occupied a space of privilege. She stayed with people of quality and her interactions were largely with them or their families. She relayed her conversations with serving people and noted her generosity towards them when she gave alms such as when she sent "a trifle" to a criminal "to take with him into slavery."⁴⁴

In her description of certain environments, such as an inn she was forced to stay at during a delay, she expressed disdain and horror rather than empathy and pity. She spoke of the smells which threatened to drive her away and the reclining figures that loitered in the space. Clearly wary, she concluded:

After scaling a ruinous staircase, I was shewn a bed-chamber. The bed did not invite me to enter; opening, therefore, the window, and taking some clean towels out of my night-sack, I spread them over the coverlid, on which tired nature found repose, in spite of the previous disgust.⁴⁵

On another occasion, she speaks approvingly about the inns she encountered although she found that the softness of their beds exacerbated her fatigue. Her surprise at the geniality of the people captured her snobbery:

The charges were moderate, and the people very civil, with a certain honest hilarity and independent spirit in their manner, which almost made me forget that they were inn-keepers, a set of men, waiters, hostesses, chamber-maids, &c. down to the ostler, whose cunning servility, in England, I think particularly disgusting.⁴⁶

While finding good quality accommodation is an issue common to travellers in any era, these passages show that Wollstonecraft's observations of the ordinary people she encountered were influenced by her familiarity with a class system. In her calls for social justice, she had bridged the inequities of class in her theoretical understanding but perhaps not so clearly in her real life responses to social contexts.

Wollstonecraft's awareness of class inequities is demonstrated more clearly in instances when she observed cases of oppression. She set this tone at the start of her visit to Sweden when she wrote about the treatment of servants, particularly women:

They are not *termed* slaves; yet a man may strike a man with impunity because he pays him wages; though these wages are so low, that necessity must teach them to pilfer, whilst servility renders them false and boorish. Still the men stand up for the dignity of man, by oppressing the women. The most menial, and even laborious offices, are therefore left to these poor drudges.⁴⁷

Wollstonecraft's tendency to generalize about groups is also reflected in her statements about the national character of a population. "The Danes, in general," she writes, "seem

extremely averse to innovation, and, if happiness only consist in opinion, they are the happiest people in the world; for I never saw any so well satisfied with their own situation."⁴⁸

While she proffered this cultural assessment of the Danes, she also claimed in the *Letters* that it was not her intent to so generalize:

Do not forget that, in my general observations, I do not pretend to sketch a national character; but merely to note the present state of morals and manners, as I trace the progress of the world's improvement. Because, during my residence in different countries, my principal object has been to take such a dispassionate view of men as will lead me to form a just idea of the nature of man.⁴⁹

Perhaps Wollstonecraft did not provide more fully developed portraits of the people she met because her gaze was incessantly trained on the larger issues she wanted to explore in her writing. The details of one person's personality or another person's lifestyle were not her focus. She was compelled to explore philosophical ideals, diagnose social ills, and prescribe a path for social change.

To express her philosophical views, Wollstonecraft often referenced topical occurrences. When in Copenhagen, she learned of a public execution. In observing the crowds returning from witnessing this act of savagery, she wrote about the spectacle and the way it supported questionable ideas of justice. Exhibiting a surprisingly progressive sensibility, she advocated for an end to the practice:

I am persuaded that till capital punishments be entirely abolished, executions ought to have every appearance of horror [sic] given to them; instead of being, as they are now, a scene of amusement for the gaping crowd, where sympathy is quickly effaced by curiosity... [E]xecutions, far from being useful examples to the survivors, have, I am persuaded, a quite contrary effect, by hardening the heart they ought to terrify.⁵⁰

Wollstonecraft's reluctance to pursue connections in depth reflected the risks she had to contend with as a woman travelling, for the most part, on her own. Her security and safety were of paramount concern and she was cautious in dealing with strangers and new acquaintances. There's perhaps an even stronger personal subtext to her protective behaviour.

Wollstonecraft had suffered much loss and abandonment in her life and may have been hesitant to forge strong connections. Her aloofness also arose because she viewed friendship as transitory. She felt that people began friendships in sincerity “but as a mixture of novelty and vanity is the usual prop, no wonder if it fall with the slender stay.”⁵¹ It is also difficult to make friends when language is a barrier and there were many with whom Wollstonecraft was unable to converse on her own.

Wollstonecraft described meetings that linked into the larger context of history even if only briefly. For example, when she met Count Bernstorff, the Danish Prime Minister, she provided only summary details and general information. She commented on his prudence and circumspection as well as on his command of information and political finesse. In her opinion, his desire not to risk his popular standing meant that he would not “disturb, with the energy of genius, the stagnant state of the public mind.”⁵²

While Wollstonecraft rarely revealed individual identities, she was particularly sensitive to the stories of women and the manner in which they reflected an inevitable sadness in relations between men and women. Having learned of a young woman who had been abandoned by her spouse and the father of her child, Wollstonecraft wondered, “whether this world was not created to exhibit every possible combination of wretchedness.”⁵³

Despite the number of people she met and the company of her child and child’s nursemaid, Wollstonecraft contended with solitude and loneliness while travelling. This contributed to a thread of discontent throughout the *Letters*: “I dreaded the solitariness of my apartment, and wished for night to hide the starting tears, or to shed them on my pillow, and close my eyes on a world where I was destined to wander alone.”⁵⁴

Despite this loneliness, Wollstonecraft did not seek a new relationship; she focused on resuscitating the one with Imlay. Nevertheless, on the road “she found good society to dine with ... Perhaps her plumper appearance and more vital health made her attractive, for at every stage of her journey she met charming gentlemen who wanted her company.”⁵⁵

To cross from Copenhagen to the mainland, Wollstonecraft secured passage with a German baron and his group. The passage she wrote upon leaving the group is filled

with warmth. She talks about their parting as “a sort of separation of the soul” and there’s the sense that an opportunity to form a longer-lasting bond was lost.⁵⁶

Whether or not her attraction to one of the gentlemen in this travelling party signaled the potential for a new liaison, the connection was severed before it developed into more than a passing acquaintance. Wollstonecraft left Scandinavia as she had arrived: with her child, the child’s nursemaid, and on her own.

Consequences: Understanding and Self

Wollstonecraft recognized that travel served as a means to complete a liberal education. She emphasized that the understanding gained through travel was not so much what people learned about themselves, but what they learned about others. In her view, it tested one’s hypotheses, theories, and conclusions about the development of civilized society and the remedies available to make the world better, progressive, and perfect.

She argued that if travelling to complete one’s education were based on a rational approach, visits to the northern regions would come first. It offered the greatest contrast to the “more polished parts of Europe” and the greatest opportunity to learn about the differences between nations.⁵⁷ It was vital to Wollstonecraft that travellers’ conclusions be accurate and she was concerned that “hospitality too frequently leads travellers, especially those who travel in search of pleasure, to make a false estimate of the virtues of a nation; which, I am now convinced, bear an exact proportion to their scientific improvements.”⁵⁸

Wollstonecraft attributed value to travel and the role it played in facilitating her social critiques. Her outward gaze and philosophical observance are discernible in the *Letters*. What is more difficult to assess is what her writing reveals about the development of her personal identity. She told readers what she thought about the countries she visited and one can identify the lens through which she viewed them, but does her commentary reveal what she learned about her self?

Wollstonecraft passionately believed in the value of education. She presumed that for those, such as herself, to whom society denied or constrained or dictated what

education was appropriate, there was an individual responsibility to seek out learning and not to remain ignorant. She connected this education with a focus on morality and good behaviour including a mastery over the emotions. She felt that a cultivated mind built a more solid foundation for the passions. In her opinion it was as important to exercise the mind as much as the body and those who neglected either were idle, unrefined, and lacked moral character.⁵⁹

For Wollstonecraft, the path to fulfillment was through refinement, through the care of the mind as much as the care of the body. In her estimation, the basis of life was a moral foundation and it would be reckless to live without mastery and control. However, she herself was an intensely passionate woman and her focus on morality and thinking meant that she was in perpetual turmoil. She sought to balance her life between her intellect and her emotions, accepting the demands of the former and struggling to accept the drives of the latter.

She craved permission, whether from herself or metaphorically from the society in which she sought her place, to be in touch with her feelings, to be someone guided by reason and by passion. It was the application of her reason that led her to believe that she could use her feelings to help her make choices. She felt that the development of her intellectual powers created the imagination that in turn produced taste and “an immense variety of sensations and emotions.”⁶⁰ This allowed her to partake of the pleasure “inspired by beauty and sublimity,” values which were evident in such quantity that “the word infinite, so often misapplied, might, on this occasion, be introduced with something like propriety.”⁶¹

Wollstonecraft contemplated the spiritual dimension of life and human experience when she was in nature. She recalled, for example, an isolated spot in Norway where she could nap and spend time alone:

With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed — and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes — my very soul diffused itself in the scene — and, seeming to become all senses, glided in the scarcely-agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze, or, taking its flight with fairy wing, to the misty mountains which bounded the prospect, fancy tript [sic.] over new lawns, more beautiful even than the lovely slopes on the winding shore before me.⁶²

And while the physical environment served as a balm, it did not provide her with the internal solace she craved. A sense of vulnerability is on display throughout her work and readers witness the tug-of-war between her experiences of emotion and her desire for reason to govern her passions. She lamented the gloomy shadow this cast on her view of the world and wondered why nature charmed her only to have her wounded again. Her disappointment is palpable when she realized that her attempt to find happiness on the basis of virtue and principle were consistently thwarted in what seemed to be civilized society. She explained her disappointment in this way:

The satisfaction arising from conscious rectitude, will not calm an injured heart, when tenderness is ever finding excuses; and self-applause is a cold solitary feeling, that cannot supply the place of disappointed affection, without throwing a gloom over every prospect, which, banishing pleasure, does not exclude pain. I reasoned and reasoned; but my heart was too full to allow me to remain in the house, and I walked, till I was wearied out, to purchase rest — or rather forgetfulness.⁶³

This conflict arose for Wollstonecraft because she wanted to believe that the sheer force of human reason would bring order into the chaos she saw all around her. It was difficult for her to refute the evidence, but her letters “provided the example of a mind still committed to freedom of enquiry and hope for the future in the face of political defeat and personal despair.”⁶⁴ It was the future of humankind as much as her own.

A deeper understanding of self is evident in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*. She recognized, for example, that she could live comfortably only in a place that was advanced in knowledge even if it were imperfect. In assessing her travels, she felt like she had begun a new chapter in the history of her heart. She acknowledged the difficulty and time it took to know oneself although she pointed out that “almost every one has more of this knowledge than he is willing to own, even to himself.”⁶⁵

To Wollstonecraft, one’s knowledge and one’s actions were the external manifestations of the way in which a person chose to be in the world. This applied to both men and women who could live in reason and perpetuate a force of civilization for the betterment of human kind. So while the record of her voyage to Scandinavia is replete with personal reflections, it is ultimately a document about the progress she wished for the

world more than the self-understanding she gained about how the confluence of reason, knowledge, and virtue, in conjunction with freely expressed emotions, would guide her.

Wollstonecraft's travels did not erase her fears about the future and she struggled to reconcile the misery of existence with the joy of being alive. She yearned for proof that something eternal lived in the human heart and that life was more than a dream.⁶⁶ Her travels also helped her enunciate a vision for the world and offered her the opportunity to gather the information she needed to continue advocating for social change.

She did not find happiness immediately upon her return to London: her romance with Imlay was not rekindled and she attempted suicide once more. However, upon her recovery she established a new relationship with William Godwin and found a measure of contentment in her life with him.

As a result of travelling to Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft found a new way to be in the world. Her trip served as an application of the technologies of the self. Among the list of possible outcomes of doing so, Michel Foucault lists more than just happiness. His list of transformative results for one's life and identity includes wisdom and immortality. In Virginia Woolf's estimation, Wollstonecraft achieved both. It is still true as "we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living."⁶⁷

Notes

- ¹ For the history of women and travel, see books by Dea Birkett, *Off the Beaten Track. Three Centuries of Women Travellers* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004) and *Spinsters Abroad. Victorian Lady Explorers* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1991); Mary Russell, *The Blessings of a Good Thick Skirt: Women Travellers and Their World* (London: Collins, 1986); and Mary Morris with Larry O'Connor, ed., *The Illustrated Virago Book of Women Travellers* (London: Virago Press, 2003).
- ² Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 35.
- ³ Brian Dolan, *Ladies of the Grand Tour*, 57.
- ⁴ Mary Russell, *Blessings*, 19-20.
- ⁵ Brian Dolan, *Ladies of the Grand Tour*.
- ⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ⁹ Ingrid Kuczynski, "'Only By The Eye' - Visual Perception in Women's Travel Writing in the 1790s," in *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, eds. Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, *Stockholm Studies in English XCIX* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 28.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- ¹¹ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 3.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁸ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 315.
- ¹⁹ Stephanie Buus, "Bound for Scandinavia: Mary Wollstonecraft's Promethean Journey," in *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, eds. Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, *Stockholm Studies in English XCIX* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 222.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ²¹ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 42-43.
- ²² *Ibid.*

- ²³ Anka Ryall, "A Vindication of Struggling Nature: Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavia," in *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, eds. Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström. *Stockholm Studies in English* XCIX (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 118.
- ²⁴ Buus, *Bound*, 236.
- ²⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 10.
- ²⁶ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xix.
- ²⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 72.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 88-89.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ³⁶ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 338.
- ³⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 12.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 62-63.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 93.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 114.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁵⁵ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 347.

- ⁵⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 118.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 50.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁶⁴ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xxviii.
- ⁶⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 61.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.
- ⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, "Four Figures: III Mary Wollstonecraft" in *The Common Reader Second Series* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), 163.

Traveller: Elizabeth Gilbert

Eat, Pray, Love

(2006)

“Much later I opened my eyes, and I knew it was over. Not just my marriage and not just my divorce, but all the unfinished bleak hollow sadness of it . . . it was over. I could feel that I was free.”

Pre-Boarding

As with Mary Wollstonecraft, tackling the subject of Elizabeth Gilbert is a significant challenge because of the volume of information available on her and her work. In our media age, this material encompasses scholarly articles, interviews, speaking engagements, essays, articles, videos, photographs, blog posts, and more. In many instances, Gilbert herself is the spokesperson – the authority – on what happened, what it has meant for her, and what it may mean for others.

Gilbert has attained fame on a global scale and her status as an international celebrity is primarily due to the success of *Eat, Pray, Love (EPL)*. As of September 12, 2015, Gilbert had 102,000 followers on Twitter, 71,000 Instagram followers, and 1.36 million likes on her Facebook page. This electronic reach means that whatever Gilbert chooses to distribute via these social media platforms alone will reach approximately 1.5 million people instantaneously.

Wollstonecraft's *Letters* and Gilbert's *EPL* portray different eras, experiences, and expressions of self. The question is whether their works, when considered together, demonstrate a shift over time in the relationship between women, travel as a technology of the self, and self-understanding.

Before examining this question, as with the analysis of Wollstonecraft's work, I will look at the three pre-boarding considerations of narrative form, transcendence, and personal identity before addressing the five core topics of intention, destination, experience, engagement, and self-understanding.

Narrative Form

Elizabeth Gilbert is a professional writer who has presented her work in a variety of literary forms including fiction, non-fiction, and investigative journalism. She knew, as did Wollstonecraft, that her adventures would be published. Wollstonecraft chose to relay her experiences in letters. Gilbert recorded her story as a first-person narrative. Both women placed themselves at the centre of their stories and as such each book is autobiographical in nature.

Kristi Siegel, a professor of English with an interest in travel writing and women's stories, describes autobiography as "a selective, packaged product ... [in which] the autobiographer presents a performance, shaped by his or her knowledge of fiction (a good narrator must tell a story) and the *Bildungsroman* tradition of autobiography."¹ In this context, both the *Letters* and *EPL* are performances that showcase their creators.

Siegel goes on to say that "the central act of autobiography is revelation — making public what was private."² That is, autobiography entails exposure and transfers events from the private to the public realm while retaining a personal focus.³ As such Wollstonecraft and Gilbert were able to design the image they determined was appropriate for public consumption by deciding what they would reveal in their work. With Wollstonecraft, comparing and contrasting her private and public letters illustrates the difference between her private and public selves. Readers do not have the same access to Gilbert's personal journals, story notes, and personal correspondence. Even so, as much, if not more, is known about her experiences because she shares more information and the media provides her with perpetual exposure.

The personal focus and public process of autobiography, along with the permissiveness of the modern era, the modern obsession with self-expression, and the lower threshold for what constitutes private information, means Gilbert is more explicit in her writing. As Gilbert's travels unfold, those following along learn the intimate details of her life and, in effect become voyeurs. Each reader lives vicariously through the account of her journey and responds emotionally more than intellectually. This contrasts with Wollstonecraft's attempt to make readers think by compelling them to see the *Other* through her eyes and to feel the tensions she experienced as she tried to understand her world.

Wollstonecraft chose to address her readers directly in the *Letters* and the "you" she used referred to both Imlay as well as her collective readership. Gilbert knew she was writing for a mass market and likely realized it would be a predominantly female one since women comprise the largest share of book buyers in what would be her primary market, the United States.⁴ However, she too adopted a strategy by which she composed her thoughts as if she were addressing a single person. Gilbert wrote to one

person, her friend Darcey Steinke, because in her view, “if you ain’t writing to somebody, then you ain’t writing to nobody.”⁵

By thinking of her work as a letter to her friend, Gilbert in fact makes each of her readers a BFF, a best friend forever, a confidante. More than this, by choosing a friend so much like herself, Gilbert’s book almost becomes like a letter to herself. It is in fact more like a diary, with all the intimacy that implies, which helps to explain the strong identification and connection readers are able to make with the book. It is a public confession.

If Gilbert’s work reads as a public confession, the book fits within the framework of Foucault’s technologies of the self. For Foucault, the advent of Christianity made confession a key element in the quest for self because the religion mandated that each person know who they were, what was occurring within themselves, what tempted them, and which desires they had. This knowledge was to be shared with God or others in the community as witness against oneself. As Foucault delineates, “The truth obligations of faith and the self are linked together. This link permits a purification of the soul impossible without self-knowledge.”⁶

In choosing an autobiographical narrative form, Gilbert set the stage for her public disclosure, a disclosure which was necessary in order to know who she was, to know her self, a prerequisite for an existential transformation.

This confessional construct, which might have made Gilbert’s book earnest, sincere, and maudlin, is offset by her informal tone, the strength of her writing, and her use of humour. Her sense of humour is evident from page one where she explains that she has structured her book as a *japa mala*, a string of beads used in prayerful meditation:

When you’re traveling in India — especially through holy sites and Ashrams — you see a lot of old photographs of naked, skinny and intimidating Yogis (or sometimes even plump, kindly and radiant Yogis) wearing beads, too.⁷

Gilbert’s playful irreverence is a thread that runs through the book and enhances its readability, but it may also serve to obscure whether her memoir has deeper resonance as a work of self-exploration.

It is fair to assume Gilbert knew there was inherent market value in the story she planned to write. She recognized, and likely her publisher, too, that a story about a woman's struggle to find herself in exotic locations with the attendant moral, psychological, and spiritual growth it entailed, and perhaps even sexual adventure, would draw an audience. It was not a groundbreaking idea, neither as a travel story nor as an autobiography. Its implicit appeal lay in the promise of documenting personal progress and regression, of someone moving forward and falling back, of changing or not changing, whether for good or for ill. It is a story of identity and the formation of identity through travel.

Whether writing with humour, passion, indignation, resignation, or joy, Gilbert knew her book was a personal document. She was not speaking as a theological scholar, given that her quest involved matters of spirituality, and she was not an official spokesperson for any of the places she visited or any of the practices she embraced. Perhaps the lobbying-oriented consumer culture of today led Gilbert to stress her independence and to ensure readers understood she was not acting on behalf of any other person, place, or product.

Gilbert identifies herself as “a spiritual and emotional seeker.” If her search for spiritual truth was a key motive for leaving the United States, then it is important to understand her relationship to transcendence as she set out on what would be a year of travel encompassing extended stays in Italy, India, and Bali.

Relationship to Transcendence

Gilbert's interest in different approaches to spirituality and her search for metaphysical certainty did not begin with the voyage she documented in *EPL*. Of herself, she says, “Culturally, though not theologically, I'm a Christian. I was born a Protestant of the white Anglo-Saxon persuasion.”⁸ She perceived something lacking in the Protestant environment of her youth and as she matured, she began to question her religion. Her search began because of her need to see and feel God in a manner that varied from her early experiences of Christianity.

Gilbert's struggle with the limitations of her childhood religion echoes Wollstonecraft's experience and they were both willing to explore beyond the accepted norms of their immediate circles, such as their families. While Wollstonecraft adhered to Protestantism in her formal practice of religion, she did so in the company of dissenters and non-conformists. Gilbert looked to other cultures and to other theological belief systems and, most importantly, to a mystical experience of the divine:

Traditionally, I have responded to the transcendent mystics of all religions. I have always responded with breathless excitement to anyone who has ever said that God does not live in a dogmatic scripture or in a distant throne in the sky, but instead abides very close to us indeed -- much closer than we can imagine, breathing right through our own hearts. ... God is *an experience of supreme love*... [W]hen the question is raised, "What kind of God do you believe in?" my answer is easy: I believe in a magnificent God."⁹

In expressing the idea of God "breathing right through our own hearts," Gilbert accepts the notion of the divine resident in a being whereas Wollstonecraft's experience of divinity was intertwined with her notions of nature and the sublime. Wollstonecraft saw God in the world around her; Gilbert was searching for the God within.

Gilbert's willingness to embrace mysticism would have been anathema to Wollstonecraft's rationality. In this, Wollstonecraft shared more with Gilbert's only sibling, a sister, whom Gilbert describes as "not a religious person" and to whom Gilbert's spiritual explorations were "a point of intellectual curiosity."¹⁰ As Gilbert states, "my sister's faith is in learning."¹¹

Wollstonecraft maintained her religious roots in Christianity by finding community among unconventional practitioners within her own culture. In doing so, she challenged traditional notions of what it meant to be a person of faith and resisted the conformity of belief. In contrast, Gilbert's quest for transcendence has the appearance of defying established norms by extending her search into other cultures, but her views of the divine spirit are more traditional and conformist than Wollstonecraft's. This is evident, for example, when Gilbert explains why and how she uses the word God. She defers any discussion about the existence of God and focuses on the many words available to describe a greater being. Being able to name the divine allows her "to fully sense a

personal attendance” and for her “‘God’ is the name that feels the most warm to me, so that’s what I use.”¹²

Gilbert did not want to argue about God’s existence. She accepted the notion of God and the existence of God as a universal truth that people can comprehend. God is an entity which she held within a descriptive noun to satisfy her need to believe in a divine spirit as part of her world view which in turn influenced her sense of self and identity.

In other words, Gilbert was looking for something and that something included God. She said in a radio interview that God to her was shorthand for wonder. Without that spark of divinity to imbue life, a spark of magic and mystery, she explained, one fails to discover a higher purpose and meaning in life. In her view, the risk of that failure is to reduce each person to being nothing more than a consumer.¹³

As summarized by her friend Darcey Steinke, the woman who shaped Gilbert’s authorial voice in *EPL*, Gilbert “is a seeker whose work engages with the most important question of the 21st century; how can we, each in our own way, form a lasting and meaningful relationship with the divine.”¹⁴

However, in this search for the divine, in this shopping around for a belief system to fit her life, her temperament, and her personality, Gilbert functions as a consumer of spirituality. Paradoxically, the reason why may lie in the religious upbringing which she sought to supplant.

Gilbert is driven by the Protestant ethic of her familial heritage. She is descended from Swedish immigrant farmers on her maternal side and paternally from English Puritans. When her life appeared to be disintegrating, she launched a mission to rebuild her self because she felt that in the view of the world she had failed. Her failure to hold a marriage together, to lose a home, to fail in a material sense — in a capitalist system — is a reflection of being bad when taken in the context of Max Weber’s analysis of Protestantism.

Weber argued that Protestantism introduced parameters to regulate a person’s conduct that governed all areas of private and public life. This “tyranny of Puritanism” as he

labeled it “was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.”¹⁵ Weber also characterized Puritanism as suspicious of and hostile to cultural elements empty of religious value.¹⁶ The emergence of Pietism, he argued, meant that the practical application of religion focused on salvation in this world rather than an “ascetic struggle for certainty about the future world” and one’s good conscience was one way in which a person could enjoy a comfortable bourgeois life.¹⁷

Gilbert’s mission, when cast in the light of Weber’s work, is as much about rebuilding her sense of worth in society as it is in discovering herself. The spiritual search becomes integral to her effort because without the spiritual dimension to her quest, there would be no value in what she was doing. Gilbert had to find an experience of God in order to find her self, to prove her worth as an individual, to uncover her calling, to find worldly salvation and to gain back a good conscience that would allow her to enjoy a middle class life. Gilbert’s spiritual search became the means by which she was able to validate her journey.

Identity At Takeoff

The information available about Elizabeth Gilbert’s life before and after *EPL* is extensive and accessible in many forms. However, it is the intensely personal nature of *EPL* that magnifies the ability of readers to forge a connection with the author. Gilbert described this phenomenon during an interview in Australia. Readers, she said, will often say how much they feel they know her when they meet her for the first time. After reading her book, Gilbert says, “they freaking do.”¹⁸ So what do readers know about Gilbert as she prepared to leave home for a year’s travel abroad based on the information provided in her travel narrative?

Gilbert is the youngest child in her family and has only one older sibling, her sister Catherine. In keeping with the Protestant ethic, their parents raised the girls with a deep sense of duty and a commitment to diligent labour:

We were taught to be dependable, responsible, the top of our classes at school, the most organized and efficient babysitters in town, the very miniature models of our hardworking farmer/nurse of a mother, a pair of junior Swiss Army knives, born to multitask. We had a lot of enjoyment in

my family, a lot of laughter, but the walls were papered with to-do lists and I never experienced or witnessed idleness, not once in my whole entire life.¹⁹

This sure and solid foundation gave Gilbert a sense that she belonged somewhere, there was a place for her, she had a home, and her family accepted and valued her as an individual. Yet she struggled to fit into her remarkably conscientious family where she says she always felt like the “weakest link,” sensitive, timid, and filled with a sense of helplessness when compared to the strength of those around her. Her solution, in her twenties, was to pursue a ranching lifestyle, to be tough and rugged, to try to “make a man” of herself.²⁰

Despite the strong start to her life, Gilbert was demoralized and disheartened by the time she prepared to leave New York for Europe. At this juncture, she was a professional writer in her mid-thirties who had just negotiated a devastating divorce and, soon after, ended a love affair. She felt “sad and brittle and about seven thousand years old.”²¹

Gilbert’s sense of herself was as “a murky hole of bottomless grief.”²² This feeling is reminiscent of the melancholy that often enveloped Wollstonecraft.

To deal with their unhappiness, both Wollstonecraft and Gilbert felt they needed an escape and both saw travel as a remedy. In addition to seeking deeper self-understanding, their motivation was to run away from the old as much as it was to seek out the new. Their journeys were also attempts to evade the path of social conformity manifested in the lives of their mothers. Wollstonecraft felt her mother’s path had entailed the artifice of propriety and the shackle of dependency, while the path for Gilbert’s mother encompassed marriage, homeownership, and children.

While Wollstonecraft was confident that she need not adhere to the accepted social path for women, Gilbert struggled to justify her search for a different trajectory. In an attempt to bridge the generational gap and to seek validation for her decision to leave, Gilbert organized a lunch with her mother in New York prior to her departure. Over the course of the meal, and facing the prospect of a year’s separation, their dialogue took a personal turn that departed from the norms of “the Gilbert Family Standard Communications Rule-book.”²³

Gilbert and her mother spoke frankly about their life choices. Gilbert talked about the end of her post-divorce love affair and her mother addressed the personal sacrifices she had made to ensure the longevity of her marriage and the happiness of her children. It was a revelation to Gilbert who had never known or understood what her mother “might have decided not to fight for in the larger scheme of things.”²⁴

This insight into the choices her mother had made, but which they had never talked about before, helped Gilbert articulate the questions to which she was seeking answers: “What are *my* choices to be? What do I believe that I deserve in this life? Where can I accept sacrifice, and where can I not?”²⁵

These questions were Gilbert’s directional arrows and she launched a quest for the self-transformation she craved. Her mission entailed reflecting on her life experiences and throughout the process she was particularly preoccupied with why her marriage had failed. In assessing its collapse, Gilbert realized she had departed from a conventional lifestyle that most clearly denoted personal achievement and social success. Marriage, in her view, **is** “one of the most fundamental ways a person can find continuity and meaning in American (or any) society.”²⁶

The end of Gilbert’s marriage dislodged her from the precepts she had accepted about her life. The understanding she had grown up with, that a woman’s calling in society was to become a dutiful wife and mother and live accordingly, was shattered. Gilbert had to find a way to accept that a conventional life may not be hers to live even though her professional career had encompassed many unconventional choices. In embracing the need for a new definition of self, Gilbert chose travel as the means to discover a new way to be in the world.

Gilbert realized from the outset that her trip would be about self-transformation. According to her friend Darcey Steinke, the transformative power of desire and heartbreak has been a signature of Gilbert’s work. More personally, Gilbert’s letters to Steinke, as she coped with depression and divorce, encouraged Steinke “to see beyond black and white ideas of divorce”, to stop worrying about the search for a partner, and to move into a deeper relationship with self. In Steinke’s view this encouragement to explore a relationship with one’s self is what Gilbert gave to millions with *EPL*.²⁷

While the admonition that one ought not to worry about finding another partner may have been a learning Gilbert would arrive at as a result of her journey, the idea of an intimate life partnership had been a cornerstone of her identity and a key to her imagined ideal of happiness before she left. It was the failure of her marriage and the failure of her subsequent intimate relationship that served as the catalyst for her travels.

It also spurred her sense that to deepen self-understanding she would have to rely on more than external validation of reciprocal affection or the external trappings of a successful life. She had to get away, she had to find a new way, because the repeating pattern of love found and love lost, with the concomitant loss of value, worth, and identity in the American context was no longer sustainable.

Driven into despair, Gilbert was fortunate to be in a position whereby she could engineer an escape from what had become a suicidal frame of mind.²⁸ As with Wollstonecraft, Gilbert's choice to travel represented her decision to choose life.

Notes

- ¹ Kristi Siegel, *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 21.
- ² *Ibid.*, 20-21.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Penguin Random House, "Trends in Consumer Book Buying," *Slideshare*, October 4, 2013, <http://www.slideshare.net/PenguinRandomHouse/consumer-book-buying-trends>.
- ⁵ Elizabeth Gilbert's *Facebook* page, accessed January 29, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/GilbertLiz/posts/10202105575613913>.
- ⁶ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 40.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 1.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 13.
- ¹³ Elizabeth Gilbert, interview by Jeni Murray, *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, September 22, 2010.
- ¹⁴ Darcey Steinke, "Elizabeth Gilbert", *Darcey Steinke's Blog*, January 28, 2014, <http://www.darceysteinke.com/2014/01/28/elizabeth-gilbert/>.
- ¹⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 36-37.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130, 174.
- ¹⁸ Elizabeth Gilbert, interview by Caroline Baum, *Ideas at the House*, Sydney Opera House, January 19, 2013.
- ¹⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 61.
- ²⁰ Elizabeth Gilbert, interview by Caroline Baum, *Ideas at the House*.
- ²¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 7.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 20.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ²⁷ Darcey Steinke, "Elizabeth Gilbert."
- ²⁸ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 21, 23, 50.

On the Road

Having explored the pre-boarding factors, the discussion of *EPL* that follows is arranged, as for Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, into sections on intention, destination, experience, engagement, and self-understanding.

Intention

Gilbert embarked on her journey with a set of guiding questions, a general idea of her itinerary, and with the idea of returning to the United States. She planned to be away for a year and her travel plans, much like Wollstonecraft's, were purposeful.

EPL did not start with the story of Gilbert's departure. It started with Gilbert's "backstory," the story of how and why she arrived at the decision to set out on a quest of self-discovery. While the book is autobiographical in nature, it is a story, a constructed narrative, and Gilbert filled the role of protagonist.

As the main character and given the nature of storytelling as well as the typical narrative arc for a character's journey, Gilbert had to appear sympathetic. In order to fashion a sympathetic portrayal, Gilbert elicited the readers' care and concern for her well-being. She emphasized the desperate straits in which she found herself and encouraged readers to see why escape was the choice she had to make. She focused on her suffering, which was best exemplified by the deterioration of her marriage three years before she ventured out on her expedition.

Gilbert's travel intent emerged as her marriage collapsed because she realized the good life she was living, the life she had imagined she had always wanted, was an illusion. It was an illusion carefully crafted with her husband in which they had anticipated her eventual weariness with travel and her interest in settling down to be a housewife and mother by the age of thirty.¹

This image of a happily married woman had not materialized and the death of this dream led Gilbert to believe she had wagered her identity and lost. To survive, she had to

reclaim her agency. “I was interested only in saving my life,” she says. “I had finally noticed that I seemed to have reached a state of hopeless and life-threatening despair.”² Her objective became to overcome what she felt had been “the complete and merciless devaluation of self.”³

Gilbert found herself turning to God for answers because she had explored all other avenues to no avail. She had reached the point where her options, staying in her marriage or leaving, were equally unpalatable and she could not find the will to make a decision. Turning to God was “the beginning of a religious conversation, “an open and exploratory dialogue” that Gilbert felt would help her find her way and ultimately lead her “very close to God, indeed.”⁴

Even though she reached out through prayer for help as her marriage crumbled, Gilbert did not have a clear concept of God, other than what remained with her from her youth, nor had she had a direct experience of the divine. The pre-departure lunch she’d enjoyed with her mother had led Gilbert to believe she was justified in leaving to search for what her life choices ought to be. It was when God answered her prayers for help that Gilbert realized her search would also be a search for God.

Having found the courage to finally make a decision and after connecting with God in prayer, Gilbert chose to end her marriage. She relocated to New York City and rented a one-bedroom apartment although her initial attempt at being independent and unattached lasted only a short time. Not reconciled to the notion of being single, Gilbert entered into a new relationship which withered and which drove her yet again into a state of despair.

It was as this new affair unraveled that Gilbert began to look for answers within her self and not to assume that they lay in the arms of a man. She began to envision a life independent of any ties to a male figure and realized that she “wanted worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence — the dual glories of a human life’ more than she wanted a partnership.”⁵ She “wanted what the Greeks called *kalos kai agathos*, the singular balance of the good and the beautiful.”⁶ In fact, she viewed *EPL*, the book of her journey, as a compendium of her efforts to find balance.⁷

Gilbert's search became a search for the truth about herself. It became a search for how to conduct herself in the world, the type of work she wanted to do, the person she wanted to be, and the acceptance of her past. Her search echoed Foucault's directives to seek out truth in the care of oneself as a methodically structured spiritual investigation. Patrick Hutton, a professor of history whose primary interest is modern European intellectual history, explains that Foucault saw the psyche as a mirror, not as an archive. In Hutton's view, Foucault thought the methods by which a person sought to understand the self were more important than the meaning of the self. As Hutton concludes, "What we seek in psychoanalysis is what the Christian confessors and the Stoics sought long ago — not self-knowledge but a method of self-care."⁸ These are the technologies of the self and evidence of the continuities of practice which individuals have used through the centuries in the search for self.

Gilbert engaged in a process of rebuilding her sense of self as she travelled and this was intertwined with her efforts to come to terms with the legacy of her unsuccessful relationships. She wanted to reconcile herself with the failure of her marriage and she also continued to believe in the possibility of resuming the intimate relationship she had begun after her marriage. The desire to recommit to this affair lingered well into her travels until she reached a point where she irrevocably severed the link in a very modern manner — by electronic mail.

Gilbert used travel as a technology of the self because she also fundamentally enjoyed travel. She viewed it as the true love of her life and felt "that to travel is worth any cost or sacrifice."⁹ Travel was the mechanism by which Gilbert navigated the detritus of her dreams because it was what she felt most comfortable doing. By accepting that her ultimate state of being would not be captured in a happily ever after myth of a content homemaker, she refocused her energies on uncovering her true identity and her authentic self. She also saw this adventure as a way to determine her calling in order to give her life a sense of meaning and purpose.

Destination

While Wollstonecraft's motives for agreeing to go to Scandinavia were many, the nature of the business commission she had accepted dictated the region to which she travelled. In contrast, Gilbert could have chosen to travel anywhere. There were no restrictions on where she might go. The only external requirement she had to satisfy was to deliver a manuscript to her publisher at some future date and yet Gilbert's travel choices were notably conventional.

Gilbert planned to split the year equally between Italy, India, and Bali. The title of her book indicates the association she made between a particular human function and the particular destination she assigned to that function. She would eat in Italy (a choice which originated in her love of the Italian language), she would pray in India (where the ashram of her guru was located), and she would love in Bali (which at the outset would be most accurately defined as a loving acceptance of self). By limiting her criteria to the one thing she thought each place did well, Gilbert's choices represented stereotypical understandings of each location and reflected a narrow view of what constitutes the culture of a nation.¹⁰

In Italy her preoccupation was with the body. Her experience in India dealt with the soul and divinity. It was in Bali, and once she had done the work to heal her body and her soul, that she searched for balance. This was the final component to drawing the tripartite structure of her intellect, her physicality, and her spirituality into a harmonious whole being and not a fragmented one.

Any of these three destinations could have fulfilled the requirements of all three of these functions. Italy could function as a place for a spiritual search given its status as the centre of Roman Catholicism. The cuisine of India and Indonesia are both remarkable, and the idea of love is not typically linked to a singular location or nationality. So Gilbert's choices were not made on the basis of what each location represented, but rather on how they reflected her priorities at the time and what she viewed as the primary cultural value of each one. Her selections were made not on the basis of universally accepted truths about the nature of each place but through her personal lens of what made each destination suitable for her specific needs, wants, and desires.

Gilbert outlined the structure of her book in the introduction. She also identified the nature of her spiritual quest, thanked her guru, and explained why the names of those she met while travelling were changed for publication except for one.¹¹ Her journey began in Italy and she labeled book one “Italy or ‘Say It Like You Eat It’ or 36 Tales About the Pursuit of Pleasure.”¹²

Her interest in Italy grew after her divorce when she began to explore new opportunities and to search out new experiences. In trying to decide what she wanted, she kept on returning to the idea that she wanted to learn to speak Italian. It was not a desire rooted in a logical need, but she rationalized her desire by saying, “In this dark period of loss, did I need any justification for learning Italian other than that it was the only thing I could imagine bringing me any pleasure right now?”¹³

Mysticism had always appealed to Gilbert and she assigned fate a central role in explaining her destination choices. For example, while the goal of learning to speak Italian may not have seemed particularly relevant to her initially, in retrospect she saw it as an omen. She interpreted her unbidden yearning to learn Italian as a sign of destiny. Italy became a place she *had to* visit in order to practice the language she was studying in context. She was also captivated by “the idea of living for a while in a culture where pleasure and beauty are revered.”¹⁴

Although Gilbert identified the segment of her journey in Italy as “the pursuit of pleasure,” I believe that her time there allowed her to address an even more fundamental issue. In Italy, Gilbert explored her relationship with her own body by giving herself permission to eat, seemingly with abandon. She used travel to explore something that the social norms in her regular environment deemed unacceptable. This speaks to the potential of travel to challenge norms because “not only is travel typically fueled by desire, it also embodies powerful transgressive impulses.”¹⁵

Gilbert began a self-restorative process by defying the constraints she had accepted with regard to food consumption at home. Many North American women have accepted such constraints in order to perpetuate a socially acceptable cultural norm of femininity, whether considered in terms of feminine appearance or feminine behaviour. By indulging, Gilbert was succumbing to guilty pleasures in reaction to the strictures of her

Protestant upbringing in which such extravagance and sensual enjoyment would have been prohibited.

Once in Italy, Gilbert found herself engaged in a tug of war between the need to feel active, to be doing something with purpose, and the need to do what made her feel good, what was best suited to her mood in the moment. “For the first time in my life,” she wrote:

All I had to do was ask myself every day... ‘What would *you* enjoy doing today, Liz? What would bring you pleasure right now?’ With nobody else’s agenda to consider and no other obligations to worry about, this question finally became distilled and absolutely self-specific.¹⁶

Despite her enjoyment and newfound ease, she still struggled with her purpose and doubted herself: “Sometimes I wonder what I’m doing here, I admit it.”¹⁷

Just as Gilbert’s choice of Italy emerged from her exploration of the language in New York, her discovery of a spiritual teacher there, a female Indian guru, guided her to India. This is the basis for book two of *EPL* entitled “ ‘Congratulation to Meet You’ or 36 Tales About the Pursuit of Devotion.”¹⁸

Gilbert discovered her guru while embroiled in the intimate affair she had after her marriage ended. Her boyfriend was a disciple and during a visit to his apartment, Gilbert saw and fell in love with the guru’s portrait. In a moment of revelation which surprised her, she realized that she, too, wanted someone to guide her spiritual exploration and that this guru would be the teacher to do so.¹⁹

The guru’s ashram was in India and in yet another “meant to be” moment this discovery of Gilbert’s new spiritual leader became the foundation for her choice of India as a destination. Although she intended to spend only six weeks at the ashram and the balance of the four months visiting other spiritual centres and other holy persons, she did not: the progress she made in her spiritual quest while in residence at the ashram persuaded her to stay in the one spot.

As mystical as Gilbert’s discovery of the Guru may have been, her choice to travel to Bali was similarly inspired by coincidence. Years before, while on a magazine

assignment researching yoga vacations, Gilbert was advised to seek out a local medicine man. Intrigued, she did. After reading her palm Ketut Liyer, the medicine man, suggested that she return someday to help him practice his English. There is likely no way to ascertain how sincere his invitation was or whether it was anything more than a civil gesture, but with hindsight it became part of the lore of Gilbert's journey as another sign guiding her along the path she was meant to follow.

Gilbert titled book three, which describes her time in Bali, "'Even in My Underpants, I Feel Different' or 36 Tales About the Pursuit of Balance."²⁰ In visiting Bali, Gilbert had relied on a nebulous invitation from an obscure medicine man and had no firm plans aside from her goal of spending four months there. Upon arrival, she was dismayed to learn that the time limit on a visa to Bali was one month, but in a display of resourcefulness, she was able to extend her stay by making an illegal payment to an official.²¹ Gilbert did not arrive in Bali with a list of contacts, as she had in Italy, but she settled into a routine and went about the business of travel, finding accommodation, making connections, and initiating a new phase in her self re-imagining.

Despite the lack of certainty at the outset of her time in Indonesia, Gilbert drew upon what she had learned during her time in Italy and India and focused on the task of finding balance. Why did she associate balance with Bali? As she explained, the very nature of the social organization in Bali is contingent on balance because the Balinese world view is structured on the notion of being able to place people in time and space and to ascertain their connections to the larger network.²² One's birth determines who one is and one maintains one's identity through ritual as well as marriage, which is integral to the Balinese social structure. Marriage, particularly as it relates to the status of women, is so crucial that Gilbert's advice to single women travelling in Bali was to say "not yet" if asked whether they are married. Say not yet "even if you are eighty years old, or a lesbian, or a strident feminist, or a nun, or an eighty-year-old strident feminist lesbian nun who has never been married and never intends to get married, the politest possible answer is still: 'Not yet'."²³

In Gilbert's assessment, divorce is distressing to the Balinese because it removes an individual from the social grid. There would be significant ramifications for women

delegitimized in this manner. By not being married, a woman, particularly one of a marriageable age, disrupts the expected order of an individual's life progression and undermines social values. It reflects badly on her and on the community, which can no longer identify her as belonging to one household or another.

The gender inequities and the burdens of a ritualized society that Gilbert observed in Bali made her question the choice of it as a location in which to learn balance. She uncovered other reasons to question her selection of this particular destination. She did more reading in the local library on the history of the area and discovered that the foundation of her paradise was nasty and bloody. The reputation of Bali as a refuge and vacation spot had been established in a calculated move during the late 1960s when the Indonesian government decided to reinvent the island for international tourism.²⁴

This discovery unsettled Gilbert's notion of Bali as being the place "to search for the balance between worldly pleasure and spiritual devotion."²⁵ She persisted because she still viewed it as being the best location for what she wanted to do.²⁶ In other words, despite the new information Gilbert gleaned about Bali's history and the distressing societal restrictions on vulnerable groups within the population, she did not waver. She stayed to complete her quest amid the social conditions she questioned and the historical reality that had shaped them.

Experience

Gilbert's first stop after leaving New York was Italy and her self-exploration while there was inexorably intertwined with understanding and accepting her physicality. To change the nature of her relationship with her physical self, Gilbert remained in an urban setting rather than challenging herself in a less developed or less populated environment. She settled in Rome, embarked on the task of immersing herself in its culture, and tried to develop an understanding of what interested its residents. Most importantly, she ate. She describes meals that were particularly memorable in detail. One such meal was her first: spaghetti alla carbonara, sautéed spinach with garlic, fried stuffed zucchini blossoms, veal, and tiramisu for dessert along with red wine and warm bread.²⁷

Gilbert used eating partly to appear Italian in her sensibilities and to establish a foothold in Roman society. This attempt to fit in was counterbalanced by her acute awareness of how conspicuous she appeared in her new surroundings: “I don’t blend. Tall and blond and pink-complexioned, I am less a chameleon than a flamingo. Everywhere I go but Dusseldorf, I stand out garishly.”²⁸

Gilbert alleviated the grimmer aspects of her situation with self-deprecating humour and made a calculated authorial decision to depict herself as an *Other*. Just as she did not quite fit in with the other members of her family, in Rome she was someone who was obviously from “away”. As a result, readers see her as the rootless adventurer and empathize with her solitary status. She evoked her readers’ sympathy and elicited their admiration reinforcing the message that she was searching for a sense of belonging. Consequently, readers want her to overcome the odds. They morph into supporters cheerleading for her success and for a happy outcome.

To build a sense of belonging, Gilbert focused on using and improving her language skills. She used her rudimentary grasp of Italian to decipher newspaper articles to stay current with issues that absorbed Romans and she enrolled in language classes where she found a commonality of intent among the disparate group of learners. “Everybody,” she wrote, “even the uptight German engineer, shares what I thought was my own personal motive: we all want to speak Italian because we love the way it makes us feel.”²⁹ Gilbert emphasized her feelings. She measured the value or merit of an activity or endeavour with the sensations it invoked.

In addition to language classes, Gilbert used sightseeing to familiarize herself with Rome. She explored the city and did so in the company of the people she befriended or as a solo wanderer free of guidebook tyranny. She also travelled to Naples, Bologna, Florence, Venice, Sicily, Sardinia, and Lucca, but not for more than a week or a weekend. In her estimation, that was enough time “to get the feel for a place, to look around, to ask people on the street where the good food is and then to go eat it.”³⁰

After approximately 10 days of seemingly problem-free acclimatization in Rome, Gilbert succumbed to feelings of loneliness edged with a sense of depression. She also revealed how fragile her mental state had been in New York and that she had been on

medication for depression and anxiety. The sadness that engulfed her once more, less than two weeks after her arrival in Rome, followed shortly after she stopped taking her prescribed doses wrongly assuming that being away was the same as being healed.

In revealing this information, Gilbert showcases her skill as a storyteller. She cleverly peeled back the layers of her truth slowly drawing readers deeper and deeper into her confidence. She ensnared them by adding a feeling of anticipation to her narrative. She let them know more revelations were likely if they continued to read. In contrast, Wollstonecraft, who also hinted at secrets in the *Letters*, never made the details of her personal life explicit and her mysteries remained concealed.

In addition to contending with depression, Gilbert's emotions swung like a pendulum from one pole to the next. To reconcile her experiences with her feelings and her thoughts, she adopted a permissive and forgiving attitude towards her weaknesses and foibles. She asked:

[I]s it such a bad thing to live like this for just a little while? Just for a few months of one's life, is it so awful to travel through time with no greater ambition than to find the next lovely meal? Or to learn how to speak a language for no higher purpose than that it pleases your ear to hear it? Or to nap in a garden, in a patch of sunlight, in the middle of the day, right next to your favorite fountain? And then to do it again the next day?³¹

The comfort she gained from this approach in Italy set the stage for the much more difficult task she set for herself in India. There, she wanted to dig deeper within herself to discover the truth of who she was and to find a way in which to connect with the divine. In Gilbert's view, seeking God reversed the worldly order because it entailed engaging in a difficult process: "You abandon your comforting and familiar habits with the hope (the mere hope!) that something greater will be offered you in return for what you've given up."³²

Gilbert's search began when she arrived at the ashram in India. She immediately joined a prayer service and tried to meditate, something she had neglected to do in her four-month long stay in Italy. During this first meditation, she and the other followers repeated a Sanskrit mantra: "*Om Namah Shivaya. I honor the divinity that resides within me.*"³³ By the end of her time at the ashram, Gilbert's choice of mantra had changed to

reflect an acquired understanding of new directions in her life. Her meditative chant evolved into "*Ham-sa*" which means "I am That."³⁴

In addition to meditation, the regular practice of yoga was another key element in Gilbert's ongoing spiritual investigation. Given the reputation of yoga as a fitness discipline in the West, Gilbert explained why it was so important in her quest for God. The purpose of yoga, she wrote, can also be "trying to find God through meditation."³⁵ Gilbert explained that in the view of Yogis human discontent represented a failure to recognize the divine within. The divine within is "a supreme Self who is eternally at peace. That supreme Self is our true identity, universal and divine."³⁶ Yoga is a path to the realization of this truth and the end of despair. Any individual, regardless of religious affiliation, may use yoga as a path to the divine. This accommodation of diversity was reflected in the array of religious backgrounds among the spiritual seekers at the ashram Gilbert visited. Whichever creed they adhered to, their common purpose was a fuller realization of self.

If meditation and yoga were integral to Gilbert's spiritual search, it's intriguing to consider why she felt she had to travel to India to practice them. After all, she had access to her guru's teaching in New York and yoga knows no boundaries in the globalized world. Why travel to India to discover the divinity within? Why was that the experience that would allow her to receive the truth of the nature of the world and of herself?³⁷ The trip could not have been to see the guru in person because, in an ironic twist, the guru was travelling while Gilbert was in residence at the ashram.

Gilbert rationalized the absence of the guru by reasoning that a person did not have to be in the guru's presence to pursue one's studies. She argued that the presence of a living yogic master can be a distraction and "if you're not careful, you can get all caught up in the celebrity buzz of excitement that surrounds the Guru and lose the focus of your true intention."³⁸

The benefit of residency at the ashram was the discipline entailed in being there. In fact, it served as a devotional pilgrimage and as a test of faith. Gilbert detailed the physical and psychological rigour of life at the ashram and described days that began at 3:00 a.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m. There were also the physical challenges of living in close

quarters with strangers in a rural environment replete with insects, rodents, and reptiles, as well as extreme weather conditions.³⁹

The advantage for Gilbert was being immersed in a milieu where she was exclusively devoted to her search for the divine and to defining her relationship with the divine. She found validation in being with others who believed as she did and who were engaged in a purpose which echoed her own. She was not a misfit at the ashram and she was not alone; she was immersed in community. The sense of community and the guidance of her guru were key elements in her grueling search for enlightenment. In Gilbert's view, finding a living guru was lucky because, in addition to imparting lessons, gurus bestow their own state of grace upon their students: "And this is why you come to a Guru: with the hope that the merits of your master will reveal to you your own hidden greatness."⁴⁰

Gilbert accepted the need for a guide in her search for meaning and various individuals filled this role for her, formally and informally, throughout her yearlong journey. By emphasizing the centrality of the guide, Gilbert demonstrated a key principle in the evolving notion of self-awareness that Foucault characterizes as a loss. He argues that the role of the master took on greater importance in the change from the Socratic ideal of the care of self to the Christian-inspired notion of knowing one's self in order to seek penance for sinfulness.⁴¹

In this development, Foucault saw that the emphasis on the role of the master removed dialogue from the process of self-discovery and made the individual journey less powerful.⁴² He traced this evolution from the Stoicism in the imperial period when "a new pedagogical game" emerged in which "the master/teacher speaks and doesn't ask questions and the disciple doesn't answer but must listen and keep silent."⁴³ The dialogue in search of truth became internalized and one retired "into the self to discover - - but not to discover faults and deep feelings, only to remember rules of action, the main laws of behavior. It is a mnemotechnical formula."⁴⁴

Gilbert did not rely on the grace of heavenly salvation although she relied on God and on guides. Her quest was rooted in her worldly existence and she accepted personal responsibility for structuring her spiritual investigation. Her experience combined elements of the Platonic understanding of taking care of oneself with the emphasis on

knowing oneself from later eras. In essence, Gilbert's story is a hybrid process for gaining self-understanding and her experience extends Foucault's theory of the technologies of self. It emphasizes her agency over the process while incorporating the element of external guidance, both spiritual and temporal. It also comes with a diminution of purpose. If the Socratic ideal was to take care of oneself, to search for moral self-improvement, in order to better serve society, Gilbert's narrative offers a prescription for taking care of oneself that prioritizes the benefits to the individual.

At the ashram, Gilbert's personal experiences helped her come to a new awareness of who she was and led her to a path of forgiveness. She also experienced transcendence and made a personal connection to the divine. In her description of that moment, she described the sensation of leaving her body, stepping through time, and into the void. She described the void as being conscious and intelligent: "The void was God, which means that I was inside God. ... I just was part of God. In addition to being God. I was both a tiny piece of the universe and exactly the same size as the universe."⁴⁵

As a result of her experiences in Italy and India, Gilbert's positive outlook on life was unshakeable. She expressed this newfound sense of confidence, satisfaction, and self-awareness when she arrived in Bali: "I don't mind anything these days. I can't imagine or remember discontent."⁴⁶

Gilbert could not "imagine or remember discontent" and Wollstonecraft could not forget it. Each woman reacted differently to the way she had seen herself in the past. Gilbert's trip represented a rupture from her previous way of being whereas for Wollstonecraft it was more akin to a separation. Wollstonecraft never let go of what she felt compelled to do and Gilbert never let go of what she wanted to do. In her efforts to gain a deeper self-understanding, Wollstonecraft adhered to her roles in life as a social critic, a rights advocate, a mother, and more. Gilbert discarded everything and opened up "a clean slate to dream."⁴⁷

Engagement

In addition to having the freedom to travel, Gilbert had the resources to be away for an extended period of time. She received an advance from her book publisher to cover her

expenses, money she did not have when she began planning her escape. Her divorce had had a severe impact on her finances since the onus of the settlement had fallen on her as the primary wage earner. The advance from her book publisher was crucial in facilitating her plans.

Gilbert not only received financial support from her publisher, she also had access to a list of contacts, connections, and referrals which meant she did not have to rely on random encounters for help, particularly for her first stop abroad. She had gathered names from those she knew in America, an approach she equated to the tradition of collecting letters of introduction.⁴⁸

With her list of contacts in hand, Gilbert left New York. While away, she maintained close connections with her family — her parents, her sister, her sister's family, and her many relations. She also sustained her wide circle of friends and her professional network because technology made it possible for her to maintain contact no matter how far away she went. Her ability to escape New York and to embark on her journey was also made easier because she was neither a wife nor a mother. Aside from the commitment to write a book, she carried no other significant commitments or responsibilities with her.

While travelling on her own, Gilbert was never fully alone. From the start, she sought company and interacted with a wide array of people. In Rome, for example, she befriended a young Italian man, whom she designated as her "Tandem Exchange Partner" because they met to exchange language lessons. In addition to having the company of her new companions, friends and family members made the trip to Europe to visit her and she flew back to celebrate Christmas in the United States.

This dynamic social life reflected Gilbert's temperament and her personality. However, part of her stated intention in travelling was to explore loneliness or what she described as "my moment to look for the kind of healing and peace that can only come from solitude."⁴⁹ Gilbert also decided to spend her year abroad in celibacy.⁵⁰

The decision to remain celibate reflected new insight into what had been her pattern of intimacy. She realized that she had relied on relationships with men to guide her in life

rather than on developing a stronger, more stable sense of herself as an independent woman. Men and relationships had been part of her life from the age of fifteen. That represented almost two decades of being involved in the drama of intimate relationships: “Each overlapping the next, with never so much as a week’s breather in between. And I can’t help but think that’s been something of a liability on my path to maturity.”⁵¹

This reliance on intimacy as a path to happiness had not worked and Gilbert decided to explore life more fully as a single, celibate woman while she travelled in order to reach for a new maturity.

Gilbert was interested in the learning she would gain through solitude, but she was not going away to become a recluse. She was trying to escape what she saw as an unfulfilling predetermined path in life, but she was not running away from people. She identified her ability to make friends with anybody as one of her travelling talents.⁵² She not only counted on meeting people while she travelled, she intended on befriending them because making new friends and friendship were values she held dear. She did not want to change her outgoing personality in order to attain a new state of happiness.

As an educated woman, an author, a journalist, and a traveller, what Gilbert saw and valued in each encounter was the potential for narrative. She contrasted her approach to seeing and being in a place with that of her sister who visited her in Rome. As they toured the city, her sister, Catherine, focused on facts, dates, and architecture that held little interest for Gilbert: “The only thing I ever want to know about any place or any person is the story, this is the only thing I watch for — never for aesthetic details.”⁵³

For Gilbert then, the importance of the encounter with the *Other* was in the story, in the experience of engagement, and not what that story or experience illustrated about the state of humanity. Just as Wollstonecraft’s gaze was cast upon the world — past, present, and future — Gilbert’s gaze was fixated on the present moment, on the face of the person with whom she conversed.

Gilbert recorded random meetings, even the smallest of exchanges, such as this encounter in Rome. An older woman in a black dress sat beside her on a park bench one day and initiated a conversation. After exchanging information on where Gilbert was

from, the woman asked about Gilbert's marital status. Learning that Gilbert was divorced, the woman abruptly ended the conversation and left although not before saying that "[h]er name was Celeste, pronounced with a sharp *ch*, as in *cello*."⁵⁴

By including this vignette in her book, Gilbert made it significant. The anecdote reinforced a social value by emphasizing marital status as a way in which a person's identity is revealed or understood by the *Other*. It also provided the name of the woman with whom Gilbert conversed. While the insight was not profound, knowing a name enabled readers to visualize themselves in Gilbert's place. They, too, met Celeste that day in the park. It became a shared experience. This power of connection is why Gilbert offered a narrative of detail, not a narrative of ideas. With this level of detail and intimacy, she kept readers engaged and made her story theirs.

While Wollstonecraft emphasized detached observation in her interpersonal relationships with the *Other*, Gilbert emphasized interaction. As she travelled from Italy to India and to Bali, Gilbert created a new form of family, one she recreated in each location, to provide her comfort, solace, and companionship. She provided in-depth profiles of some of these individuals and her readers connected with them on a personal level and in an emotional way. This was particularly true with the story of Wayan, a divorcee (remarkable in the Balinese social context) and a healer.

After a bicycle accident wound on Gilbert's knee became infected, she went to see Wayan for treatment on the recommendation of Ketut Liyer, the medicine man who had lured her back to Bali. This meeting developed into a friendship and it was a meeting where destiny unfolded because, as Gilbert noted, "it was my banged-up knee that allowed me, in the end, to meet Wayan. And from the meeting, everything that was meant to happen ... happened."⁵⁵

When Gilbert learned of Wayan's financial and social difficulties, she investigated the reasons behind Wayan's dire economic prospects. What Gilbert discovered, spurred her into action. Her spiritual revelations in India had led her to a new-found appreciation for the interconnectedness of the world and, in this light, Gilbert saw Wayan's difficulties as her own. She felt compelled to act on behalf of Wayan and she sent out an electronic mail message to her friends and family to ask for donations in lieu of the birthday gifts

she would have received for her birthday. In this way, she raised \$18,000 USD, money used to build a home for Wayan, her daughter, and the two young orphans for whom Wayan had assumed responsibility.⁵⁶

This active involvement in a local, domestic situation was Gilbert's attempt to effect change through the economic empowerment of a woman. Gilbert felt that Wayan's life could be and would be improved if she owned her home and if she were able to sustain her own business. Gilbert's efforts to help Wayan were independent of current political events. She was not pursuing a course of action in order to change the world. She just wanted to help change Wayan's world.

By helping Wayan become a landowner and businesswoman, Gilbert felt she had contributed to the growth of someone who would speak up for the dispossessed, who would garner respect in the larger community through economic independence, and who would be able to overcome the stigma of her status as a divorcée. Gilbert's efforts to support Wayan may be seen as a practical application of Wollstonecraft's philosophy that "some degree of refinement, predicated on economic development, is necessary, especially if women are to be treated as more than drudges."⁵⁷

However, Gilbert's support of Wayan does not mean she is a social crusader in the fashion of Wollstonecraft. Wayan's needs motivated Gilbert to act, Wayan helped to define what those needs were, and Gilbert decided on the appropriate course of action. Gilbert's intentions were kind, but her assistance neither addressed the structural inequities in Balinese society nor the needs beyond Wayan's circle of influence.

Gilbert equipped Wayan with the appearance of success according to Western standards — Protestant, American, and capitalist — the very standards that had resulted in Gilbert's depression and her need for escape. Her motivation was charitable, but in the end, readers are rewarded with a feel good story of one woman's improved social standing. It is not a cry for emancipation or a cry to end the patriarchal structure.

If one construes Gilbert's actions in supporting Wayan as reflective of an imperial legacy of charity, it is interesting to consider if there's also evidence of class-consciousness in her work. With a twenty-first century American outlook which claims to be unconstrained

by class considerations (a claim which may easily be debated with respect to economic inequality at least), Gilbert did not filter her associations based on whether or not the individual she engaged with was from an upper or lower class. Given her status as a successful author and magazine writer and her network, she could have used her connections to pursue high profile encounters, but she did not. Her connections and encounters were with men and women of all economic strata; she did not cultivate a lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous approach to her travels.

While the apparent lack of class-consciousness is borne out in the connections she made, it would be naive to assume these interactions did not reflect a power imbalance and a fundamental inequity. Gilbert had the freedom to eat what she wanted, go where she wanted, and do what she wanted, a freedom not necessarily available to those she befriended. It is likely that for many, their interactions with Gilbert allowed them to gain the income they needed to feed themselves and their families. That is, their livelihood and survival depended on helping her, and others with similar economic and social freedoms, as she indulged in the liberty of discovering herself.⁵⁸ The privilege of self-exploration and self-transformation through travel was Gilbert's. It was not theirs.

Another central character in Gilbert's story is Richard from Texas, the one person whose real name she used in the book. Gilbert met Richard at the ashram in India and he became, in his own fashion, one of Gilbert's yogis. While not a guru per se, he had an undeniable influence on Gilbert and guided her along her path to enlightenment. He had an even more muddled life than Gilbert's and yet he had a tremendous sense of humour. He nicknamed her Groceries based on how much she ate, perhaps a legacy from her time in Italy. Richard's presence at the ashram gave Gilbert a sense of security: "His giant ambling confidence hushes down all my inherent nervousness and reminds me that everything really is going to be OK. (And if not OK, then at least comic.)"⁵⁹

Richard helped Gilbert understand that relinquishing control of events and outcomes was crucial for opening a path to the spiritual connection she sought. In one exchange, he scolded her on her inability to let go of her obsession with David, her former lover. He felt that she was reluctant to sever the connection because she was afraid of being alone. He counseled her:

[H]ere's what you gotta understand, Groceries. If you clear out all that space in your mind that you're using right now to obsess about this guy, you'll have a vacuum there, an open spot -- a *doorway*. And guess what the universe will do with that doorway? It will rush in -- God will rush in -- and fill you with more love than you ever dreamed. So stop using David to block that door. Let it go.⁶⁰

At the ashram she learned to leave that doorway open and invited God into her life.

From India and following her spiritual awakening, Gilbert travelled to Bali. There, she reconnected with Ketut Liyer, the aged medicine man. However, the most significant connection Gilbert made in Bali was with Felipe, an older Brazilian divorcé and Australian ex-pat. Their chance meeting developed into a passionate love affair once Gilbert overcame her reluctance and felt confident enough in the progress she had made in unearthing her identity to disavow celibacy. She wondered if embarking on a new affair would ruin her journey in writing and in life, but concluded, "On the other hand — some romance would be nice."⁶¹

Despite Gilbert's transformative experiences in Italy and India, it is the romance with Felipe which many readers focus on as the most significant outcome of her time abroad. Her relationship with Felipe developed into a deeper commitment and a few years later he became her husband.⁶² Reflecting themes of wish fulfillment, rescue, and love found, Gilbert's romance with and eventual marriage to Felipe gave EPL one of its strongest connections to the happy ever after feel of a modern fairytale. While this experience was life changing, it was not the only significant personal result of her travels.

Consequences: Understanding and Self

Wollstonecraft cast her critical gaze on the countries she visited. She translated what she saw and thought into prescriptions for a better England and for a better world. Gilbert, too, conversed about cultural stereotypes and national characteristics in her book. Rather than use her observations to critique the countries she visited, she used them to reflect upon her own behavior and to determine the lifestyle changes she needed to make.

In one example, Gilbert observed that in contrast to pleasure-seeking Italians, Americans were entertainment seekers. In the constant search for amusement and distraction, she felt that they were unable to relax simply for the pleasure of doing so: “Americans don’t really know how to do *nothing*. This is the cause of that great sad American stereotype — the overstressed executive who goes on vacation, but who cannot relax.”⁶³

Gilbert took this insight as an indication of something she needed to learn in order to “take care of herself” and to move beyond merely “knowing herself.” One of her new friends introduced her to the expression “*il bel far niente*,” which means “the beauty of doing nothing.” It was a skill, he claimed, that Italians had mastered.⁶⁴ Gilbert took this Italian acceptance for doing nothing as permission to shed her cultural and familial expectations and practices. She overcame her own guilt about being idle without remorse and without rebuke from others or from herself. In other words, she found the courage to transgress a value she had always upheld as a Protestant American woman.

While in Italy, Gilbert learned to give herself permission to do nothing and to eat. It is also where she developed an understanding of the value of loneliness as opposed to resisting it as a liability. She admonished herself in the third person as a teacher instructs a student:

So *be* lonely, Liz. Learn your way around loneliness. Make a map of it. Sit with it, for once in your life. Welcome to the human experience. But never again use another person’s body or emotions as a scratching post for your own unfulfilled yearnings.⁶⁵

Gilbert embraced the value of loneliness, which she did not see as a commitment to being single or alone. While Gilbert found love at the end of her travel memoir, she felt that this time she hadn’t simply used a relationship with a man to assuage her discontent or to fill a void in her life. By the end of her time in Bali, she had succeeded, according to her self-assessment, in defining and identifying her self as a separate, self-sufficient entity. She understood that the long-term viability of her new partnership would have to be based on a connection between equals; she would not accept being only one half of a whole. She set boundaries and didn’t conflate loving a person with giving up her self.

She knew not to subsume her identity in the identity of being a couple or, as she described it, she knew better than to become “the permeable membrane.”⁶⁶

Gilbert explored the idea of loneliness not only in terms of physically being on her own, but in reflecting on the loss of the roles she had expected to play in life, those of wife and mother. In coming to terms with this loss, she contrasted her situation with that of her sister. To Gilbert, her sister’s “solitary nature means she needs a family to keep her from loneliness; my gregarious nature means I will never have to worry about being alone, even when I am single. ... I still can’t say whether I will ever want children.”⁶⁷

By releasing marriage and motherhood as requirements for a “good” life, Gilbert found a way to accept what her family members and others within her society demarcated as unconventional or interpreted as signs of an unstable life. She accepted that her calling may not include marriage and motherhood and that relinquishing these roles did not diminish her morality or her self-worth.

Gilbert’s understanding of her life’s meaning and purpose developed over the course of her entire journey, but the evidence of her move towards it began in Italy. Sadness threw her into a state of near depression in Rome, but she demonstrated her growing mental strength and acuity when she visited Venice. In observing the peeling creakiness of the city (“where I don’t think I would have gotten off the antidepressants quite so quick”), she recognized that she was able to enjoy the melancholy of the city without assuming it as her own. She was able to separate herself from her environment and she interpreted this as a sign “of healing, of the coagulation of my self.”⁶⁸

This coagulation of self, to use Gilbert’s term, was also evident during a visit to Sicily. There she recognized and accepted that the tragedies in her life had been personal and self-inflicted. She understood that access to financial, artistic, and emotional resources had enabled her to tackle her crisis of identity. However, she felt that it was her belief in the incorruptibility of artistic excellence and the trustworthiness of beauty that gave her the inner strength to understand herself. “Pleasure,” she wrote, “cannot be bargained down ... [and] the appreciation of pleasure can be an anchor of one’s humanity.”⁶⁹

As she approached the end of her time in Italy, Gilbert's questions and observations became more substantive. She questioned what it was she could trust in life and whether she would accomplish what she set out to do. This reflected the work she did in preparing the text for publication. By then she knew the entire story and she knew how the plot would unfold. That is, she knew the next section in her book would be set in India and would provide the details of her metaphysical journey. For Gilbert's readers a leap from gnocchi to God may have been too great a jump, so it's likely she arranged her narrative in such a way as to facilitate a logical progression from eating to spirituality.

In building the narrative connection between her time in Italy to her time in India, Gilbert charted her growing perception of what having control meant to her and the need to relinquish the expectation of always being the one in control. She attributed her need to be in control to what she describes as a metaphysical crisis when she was nine years old, going on ten. It was at this time that she began to appreciate the rapid progress of life and learned to understand that life ultimately resulted in death for everyone.

This awareness of death, she came to believe, explained the frenetic pace of her life. She desperately wanted to discover a mechanism by which she could slow down and control "mortality's inevitable march."⁷⁰ The effect had been to fragment herself into many Liz Gilberts.⁷¹ While the path to reclaiming wholeness was to let go, she understood the fear entailed in doing so. She had to learn that the universe would not end without her direct control of events. The message she felt she got was to "[s]it quietly for now and cease your relentless participation. Watch what happens."⁷²

This notion of ceasing her "relentless participation" may in part explain why Gilbert decided to stay at the ashram for a full third of her year away rather than just six out of the twelve weeks she had initially planned. In her words, "is more travel really going to bring me any closer to revelatory contact with divinity?"⁷³ She realized the answers she sought would not be found if she kept running. They were perhaps more likely to be found once she accepted that she could stay in one place since the space for transformation is not in a person's external environment, but in one's internal being. It also had to be independent of deflecting blame onto others: "The rules of transcendence insist that you will not advance even one inch closer to divinity as long as you cling to

even one last seductive thread of blame... From that place of meditation, I found the answer — you can finish the business yourself, from within yourself. It's not only possible, it's essential."⁷⁴

Her renewed focus on the inner journey allowed her to move from a state of merely existing to a state of action. She questioned and searched rather than simply pled or prayed for deliverance. She learned that her search had to be directed to a specific target in order to gain a specific answer and to establish a new understanding before moving to the next level of revelation. God knew what she needed. Gilbert realized that resolution depended on whether or not she also knew what she needed. Prayer was a relationship and "[i]f I want transformation, but can't even be bothered to articulate what, exactly, I'm aiming for, how will it ever occur?"⁷⁵ She in fact learned to assume "custodial responsibility" for maintaining her own soul.⁷⁶

Gilbert recognized that she would not have control over every aspect of life. However, she had the capacity to exert mastery over her thoughts. Recognizing that capacity for agency allowed her to act. She also realized that taking care of her self was work that had to be consciously sustained throughout a lifetime. There would be no end to the responsibility for her physical, mental, and spiritual care.

She also appreciated the value of ceremony and ritual. Spiritual ceremonies, in her assessment, offered human beings a safe environment in which to express the most complicated human emotions, whether of joy or trauma. They were a way to unburden one's self and to ensure the ability to function without being weighed down by emotionality. This "ritual safekeeping" was critical and Gilbert sanctioned the personal invention of whatever ceremony a person needs in order to cope. She wrote:

[I]f your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you're craving, then you are absolutely permitted to make up a ceremony of your own devising, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet. If you bring the right earnestness to your homemade ceremony, God will provide the grace. And that is why we need God.⁷⁷

Her ultimate understanding, as promoted by her guru, was that God dwells within each person as they are.

In seeing God as an internal manifestation, Gilbert found the permission to be as she was made and to accept her natural character.⁷⁸ This perception of being one with God imparted a sense of unity and gave Gilbert a feeling of rescue by the end of her journey. She was “happy and healthy and balanced” due to her own efforts and not those of a fairy-tale prince.⁷⁹ She had been relieved of the mental, physical, and spiritual baggage she carried with her when she boarded the plane in New York. She had “never felt less burdened by myself or by the world.”⁸⁰ However, as much as Gilbert viewed her spiritual success as a sign of personal agency, she achieved her new understanding of self because of her accommodation with God and by finding love. It is yet another way in which her tale reflects traditional structures and systems.

Gilbert, in a practice she developed with her friends in Italy, chose a word to describe herself after her time in India. She chose the word *antevasin* or one who lives at the border. It was a word that captured her new understanding of life as a constant tension between one’s old thinking and one’s new understanding. It is a border in perpetual flux and the challenge was to stay “mobile, movable, supple...betwixt and between – a student on the ever-shifting border” because “the best we can do, then, in response to our incomprehensible and dangerous world, is to practice holding equilibrium *internally* — no matter what insanity is transpiring out there.”⁸¹

This was Gilbert’s declaration of faith. It reflected a shift from an active participation in the world to a preoccupation with self. Her message was that to fulfill one’s purpose as a human being, one must establish, sustain, and maintain an internal sense of balance and well-being. Furthermore, her metaphysical journey had also been in pursuit of her personal happiness whereas happiness would have been too mediocre an aspiration to Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft emphasized the pursuit of knowledge over happiness because “if contentment be all we can attain, it is perhaps, best secured by ignorance.”⁸²

To Wollstonecraft, there was conflict between being a person of knowledge and one’s ability to be content. In Gilbert’s view, knowledge and happiness can coexist particularly in the experience of self. The difference in their views reflects not only changing notions of the self, it also reflects the changing understanding of what it means to be a woman. As Gilbert posits, women born in the last 70 years in the industrialized western world are

a “new species of human being.”⁸³ With the unimagined freedom women have earned and fought for, women are still trying to understand how to be free and independent. For example, there are enormous societal expectations on women to be perfect, to have it all, at the same time that society fails to address issues which have a disproportionate impact on the lives of women including, but not limited to, child care, employment equity, and wage parity.

Gilbert’s work is a statement on the need for faith whatever shape or form that faith may take. She believes that to make one’s life better individuals must define their relationship to the divine and must take care of themselves. In doing so, each person improves the world for others. If *EPL* is a work which reclaims faith as a central tenet of improving existence on earth, perhaps what humanity has lost, in the time that’s elapsed between Wollstonecraft’s voyage and Gilbert’s, is a belief in the human ability to effect change through reason. A person may still be able to rationalize his or her faith in God and his or her need for God, as Gilbert did through her journey, but there no longer seems to be an unshakeable faith in humankind to make the world a better place for all.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 10.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ Patrick H. Hutton, "Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 139.

⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys*, 9.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

²² *Ibid.*, 225-229.

²³ *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 236-239.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³² *Ibid.*, 175.

- ³³ Ibid., 120.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 141.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 121.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 122.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 126.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 128.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 124.
- ⁴¹ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 22.
- ⁴² Both Gilbert and Foucault recognize that the status of Guru, master, teacher, or guide may be subject to abuse. Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 124-125, and Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 27.
- ⁴³ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 32.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.
- ⁴⁵ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 199.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 235.
- ⁴⁷ John Mayer, interview by Jian Ghomeshi, Q, 88.1 CBC FM, September 2, 2013.
- ⁴⁸ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 42.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 7.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 65.
- ⁵² Ibid., 41-42.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 89.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 39.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 254.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 273-274.
- ⁵⁷ Tone Brekke and Jon Mee, introduction, xxi.
- ⁵⁸ Omar Chu, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2013.
- ⁵⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 139.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 150.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 269.
- ⁶² Elizabeth Gilbert, *Committed. A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*, (New York: Viking, 2010).
- ⁶³ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 61.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 65.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.

- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 92.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 100-101.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 114-115.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 152.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 151-153.
- ⁷² Ibid., 155.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 171.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 186.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 176-177.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 177.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 187.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 192.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 329.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 260.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 204-206.
- ⁸² Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 85.
- ⁸³ Elizabeth Gilbert, interview by Caroline Baum, *Ideas at the House*.

The Return Home

Wollstonecraft's *Letters* and Gilbert's *EPL* demonstrate the ways in which travel served as a technology of the self for each author. Wollstonecraft tested her intellectual hypotheses, accumulated evidence for her arguments, and spun a vision for the future of humanity. In so doing, she solidified her role as a political philosopher, a social commentator, and a proponent for justice. Gilbert tested the boundaries of her understanding, explored ways to balance her life, and fashioned a new understanding of self. In so doing, she pursued an alteration of being which would enable her to be happy, to maintain balance, and to live with God.

Wollstonecraft and Gilbert chose travel as a means by which to escape unhappy lives and to conduct a quest for new ways of being in the world. Travel, especially for women, is suited to such a task because it “strips away the illusions of women’s condition, revealing their struggle for personal discovery and social change in the face of cultural ideologies constructed to restrict their mobility and independence.”¹

Wollstonecraft sought social change and Gilbert sought personal transformation. Their urge to do so by going away revealed an even more fundamental principle. That is, perhaps they were both searching for home.

Neither Wollstonecraft nor Gilbert, at the outset of their journeys, had a firm sense of home: home as a physical structure, a sense of place, or a sense of self. Their impulse to travel arose because they did not feel at home where they were and their returns signified their individual affirmation in the value of home and the desire to live at home again. They left home to find the freedom they lacked and came back home to live with the freedom they nurtured while away. Home was metaphorically the place they left and the place to which they returned, a common characteristic of women’s journeys.²

By travelling and reflecting upon their experiences, both Wollstonecraft and Gilbert constructed new understandings of the manner in which they would live their lives and

they did so as agents of their own fate. They conducted their self-explorations in a way that corresponded with the framework of Foucault's technologies of the self. In his view, the responsibility to create meaning and value in life is a never-ending task and the basis of all human effort. With this exertion of creativity, human power is revealed and the capacity to use it well is where each person's destiny lies.³

A feeling of hopelessness and desperate acts marked Wollstonecraft's return to London. She attempted suicide a second time, survived, and recovered. She renewed her acquaintanceship with William Godwin and their relationship grew intimate over time. She "admitted that she was happy" and when she discovered she was pregnant, she agreed to marry him.⁴ Whether or not she found a home in which she could be at rest or if travel would have continued to be a part of her life with her family are unanswerable questions. She died from complications in childbirth. The daughter Wollstonecraft had with Godwin, Mary, would herself be a traveller whose life of wandering arose because of her relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Gilbert's quest led her back to a home in the United States albeit not an urban one. She "lives in the small river town of Frenchtown, New Jersey, where she and her husband (more widely known as "That Brazilian Guy From EAT PRAY LOVE") run a large and delightful imports store called TWO BUTTONS."⁵ Gilbert's decision to marry was not an easy one to make and that struggle is the topic of the book *Committed*, which she published after adjusting to her life as a celebrity. The spotlight has placed Gilbert on the global popular culture stage and her efforts are geared to ensuring she remains there. She continues to travel and to appeal to the following of devotees she has garnered. Many regard her as an exemplar of the happiness and success a woman may achieve through self-transformation.

In studying these two works together, Wollstonecraft appears to be the more progressive of the two. She was an advocate for change with ideas and notions that her contemporaries viewed as alarmingly unconventional. Gilbert is liberated with ideas and notions that may be interpreted as surprisingly traditional. Wollstonecraft was a visionary with a focus on the commonality of the human experience while Gilbert has become a guru with a focus on the individuality of human experience.

The changing nature of the “questions” which each author sought to answer reflected differences in their respective cultural milieus and the transformation of the social norms with which they contended. This contrast between Wollstonecraft’s outer journey to observe the world and Gilbert’s inner journey to transform her self is magnified when examining the private information each woman shared in her travel narrative.

There are passages in *Letters* where Wollstonecraft shared her emotions, but the person she was, the “I”, remained concealed or hinted at or buried behind a public persona of scholar, philosopher, and social critic. She respected the standards of privacy and was reticent when dealing with topics that touched on social sensibilities. In one example, she discretely referenced the perils she faced as a solo female traveller and referred to rape as “the other evil which instantly, as the sailors would have said, runs foul of a woman’s imagination.”⁶ She focused on engaging the public in a dialogue on social, political, and economic issues, not in a dialogue about the intimate details of her life.

On the other hand, Gilbert’s “I” was prominent, immediate, and visible. She recounted what she felt, what she did, and how she was affected. She was aware of her central role in the story and the contemporary environment allowed her to occupy that space. Gilbert, too, likely concealed much, given that her manuscript would have been prepared from notes and private journals after her voyage. However, the standards of privacy today mean that every detail was viable in the public realm, from masturbation to bladder infections.⁷ She was focused on engaging the public in a dialogue about her own life in explicit detail, and not in a dialogue on social, political, and economic issues.

Another difference to consider was the market for each work since both authors knew their books were intended for public consumption. Wollstonecraft’s readers relied on the availability of her book in print and the circle of readership was larger than for her other work given the greater accessibility of the book’s subject matter and its personal nature. Gilbert’s work was released into the mass market of a boundless consumer-driven society that extended beyond the confines of print. Her story is retold in countless iterations from the feature film adaptation to the excerpts available, along with other information, in magazine articles, television interviews, web interviews, the author’s own website, her Facebook page, her Twitter feed and so on.

By capitalizing on this omni-presence, Gilbert has become an inspirational figure and a purveyor of a way to become happy. She consciously cultivates this persona and has many devoted followers whom she often addresses in her Facebook posts as “Dear Friends” or “Dear Ones.” By creating this public dependency on her as the source of inspiration, Gilbert has ensured her continuing viability as a brand, a product, one of the key elements in the self-help tradition.⁸ By doing so, Gilbert follows in the path of another modern icon, Oprah Winfrey, with whom she shared a stage during the fall of 2014. As noted in the promotional material, Gilbert “will be participating in Oprah’s The Life You Want Weekend [tour] headlined by Oprah telling her inspiring story. See where the tour is heading, get tickets and find out which other experts will be speaking.”⁹

Gilbert has become an expert on getting what one wants. Her work may be interpreted as a modern fairy tale and she has, in effect, become a fairy godmother. She may not bestow gowns, tiaras, sparkling shoes, and a Prince upon her needy subjects, but she is dispensing wisdom, self-awareness, and enlightenment on a superficial basis. With daily Facebook affirmations and her stature as a loving, benevolent, wiser woman reaching out to those who have not yet made their dreams come true, Gilbert is in danger of becoming a self-help gimmick, a parody of herself. In fact, a Publishers Weekly review of her upcoming release, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*, identifies the new book as a “self-help manual” which will inspire readers “even if only to dream of a life without limits.”¹⁰

If Gilbert’s journey to Italy, India, and Bali constituted a search for self-understanding and for faith, why is her book synonymous with wish fulfillment and why can we categorize it as a work of self-help? The evolution of the self-help industry in the United States helps explain why Gilbert’s work is less about women and travel than it is about fixing one’s life. As author Micki McGee outlines, self-help literature today strives to balance the 1970s’ emphasis on individual self-interest with the values of community and equality that dominated the 1960s’ social landscape. The resolution of the tensions between these two poles has resulted “in a renewed emphasis on spiritual values recast as therapeutic theism.”¹¹

This therapeutic theism is evident in Gilbert's story, which becomes a formula. This "reliance on formulas, both for writing self-help books and for the transformations of their readers, is crucial to the inspirational story. Formulas explain to the reader how individual success can translate into a universally replicable salvation."¹² The notion that there may be a recipe for a universally replicable salvation is also bolstered by the idea that one shapes reality simply by exerting the power of the mind. In the Western context, this mind-power represents a fusion of "a rhetoric of science with scripture and divine revelation."¹³

Mind-power engenders a sense of personal responsibility for self. However, there is a negative consequence to the way Western society has embraced the notion of mind-power. The results of shaping our reality are meant to serve the interests of the individual self and not the interests of the greater collective. It undermines the Socratic notion of service to the community.

Gilbert anticipated this argument. She contends that even though her story was a personal one, the ramifications extended beyond her own circumstances. To her, the search for happiness not only preserves and benefits the self, but it is also a generous gift to the world. Only by achieving self-satisfaction will an individual be freed of misery and be in a position "to serve and enjoy other people."¹⁴

Gilbert's interpretation reflects the context of a capitalist culture and ideas of self-improvement characteristic of this age of hyper-individualism.¹⁵ The illusion is that one opens the space to serve others by finding self-contentment. Many do not. The benefits of self-work are often limited to one's own situation and available only to personal circles of influence, list of contacts, and personal or professional connections. Efforts beyond that may be limited, as was Gilbert's help in the case of Wayan. To remedy a situation she deemed inequitable, Gilbert relied on charity rather than any process of distributive justice.¹⁶ Similarly, engagement in the activities necessary to effect substantive change within local communities or within the global community may, in this culture of self-help and technological wizardry, remain superficial.

In contrast, Wollstonecraft focused on long-term, large-scale change or as she described it, "my favourite subject of contemplation, the future improvement of the world."¹⁷ She

believed in human perfectibility and progress and she placed her faith in the possibility of change for all. To her, advancement was inevitable and imperative because it unfolded the scope of human reason and ability, which were boundless.¹⁸ Because she was confronting the failure of progress and revolution which she saw around her, she could not, in good conscience, prioritize her personal needs or desires or matters which were of benefit only to her self. Her worldview precluded a self-focus and she lamented, “why should I weep for myself? — ‘Take, O world! thy much indebted tear!’”¹⁹

Wollstonecraft struggled against the constraints of society and she wanted women to challenge the social identities to which they were expected to conform. She felt that they would learn to do so through education. Wollstonecraft wanted women to “become full autonomous spiritual rational beings, independent enough to become civic contributors.”²⁰ In contrast, Gilbert has constructed a twenty-first century fairy tale that reinforces notions of wish fulfillment rather than female empowerment.

Frequent characteristics of fairy tales and folk tales include a central conflict which includes transformation, an allegorized plot to deal with challenging subjects, the recruitment of helpers leading to the climax of the plot in which the protagonist takes her rightful place in society, a happily ever after conclusion, humour, and supernatural elements.²¹ Gilbert used humour throughout her work. She incorporated supernatural elements by emphasizing the “signs” which gave her adventure a feeling of “it was meant-to-be” and by detailing her personal experience of God. Along the way, helpers such as Richard from Texas at the ashram and Ketut Liyer in Bali facilitated her journey. She used the allegory of the quest to deal with such challenging subjects as depression and sexuality. She also took her rightful place in society once she had successfully completed her quest and reaffirmed her sense of identity.

By finding herself, Gilbert completed a self-transformation that took her from suicidal thoughts and a solitary state to riches, fame, and love. It is a story of self-emancipation that functions as a cultural meme. That is, it becomes a pedagogical manual with only one lesson plan: if one’s life as a woman is characterized by unhappiness, depression, and economic or social failures, the answer lies in connecting with one’s inner divinity to find a new way of being full of promise, opportunity, and reward. Her story reflects a

Disney version of a traditional fairytale in which, as Kay Stone summarizes, the heroine lacks in ambition, sings through her troubles while waiting for the inevitable prince to rescue her, and knows that “the right clothes, the right place, the right boyfriend will make her a queen forever.”²²

The reader who interprets *EPL* strictly as a rescue story by a prince overlooks Gilbert’s agency in effecting change in her life. She is ambitious, has reaped many rewards through her own efforts, and continues to inspire many around the world. However, by obscuring the challenges women continue to grapple with, especially in the developed Western world, Gilbert promotes ideas and notions which may imperil the legacy of authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft who through their work and lives wanted to secure a place in society for women as fully realized, whole human beings.

Gilbert’s recipe for happiness aligns with approaches which burden the individual with all the responsibility for self-transformation independent of context, history, and any or all underlying social, political, and economic conditions. It is this focus on the seemingly unanchored individual effort that perhaps represents the gravest danger in terms of social justice because “a recurring criticism of self-help is that by assigning all responsibility to the individual it unfairly absolves the society from culpability.”²³

In author Micki McGee’s envisioning of the belaboured self, this is a trap whereby society is “caught in a cycle of seeking individual solutions to problems that are social, economic, and political in origin.”²⁴ As she says, with this loss of the social safety net “and in the face of profound economic injustice, any discussion of self-actualization is rendered absurd.”²⁵

In her *Letters*, Wollstonecraft showcased travel as a way to learn about the world. In Gilbert’s *EPL*, travel is a way to learn about one’s self. This represents a shift from the philosophical observation of Wollstonecraft who, despite the constraints of her era and her struggles with her personal wishes and dreams, advocated for radical social transformation to improve the lives of all, especially women. Gilbert, with all the advantages of her era fulfilled her wishes and dreams of personal transformation, yet upholds the patriarchy of happily ever after which depends on women accepting the

status quo of what looks like empowered equality rather than continuing to advocate for change.

By aligning the freedom of women to travel with the need for personal reinvention, as Gilbert has done, travel by women no longer serves to challenge the patriarchal system of male privilege, but supports it. It is a change symptomatic of a narrowing vision of commonality and it points to the continued triumph of individualism over the sense of shared responsibility for others, for society and for the world.

Notes

- ¹ Bonnie Frederick and Virginia Hyde, introduction to *Women and the Journey: The Female Travel Experience*, ed Bonnie Frederick and Susan H. McLeod (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1993), xxviii.
- ² *Ibid.*, xix.
- ³ Patrick H. Hutton, "Foucault, Freud," 140.
- ⁴ Virginia Woolf, "Four Figures," 163.
- ⁵ "Bio," *Elizabeth Gilbert*, accessed August 11, 2013, <http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/bio/>
- ⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 8.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 287, 297.
- ⁸ Jessica Lamb-Shapiro, *Promise Land*, 24.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Gilbert, "The First Step To Long-Lasting Happiness," *oprah.com* from *O, The Oprah Magazine*, July 2014, <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/How-to-Be-Happier-Elizabeth-Gilbert>.
- ¹⁰ Publishers Weekly, "Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear," www.publishersweekly.com, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-59463-471-0>
- ¹¹ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 55.
- ¹² Jessica Lamb-Shapiro, *Promise Land*, 29.
- ¹³ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 60.
- ¹⁴ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 261.
- ¹⁵ Roman Krznaric, "How To Start An Empathy Revolution."
- ¹⁶ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 183-184.
- ¹⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 122.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60-61.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ²⁰ John Mullan, Barbara Taylor, and Karen O'Brien, interview by Melvyn Bragg, "Mary Wollstonecraft," *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, December 31, 2009, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00pg5dr>.
- ²¹ Nicky Didicher, e-mail message to author, March 11, 2015.
- ²² Kay Stone, "Walt Disney's Americanization of the *Marchen*," in *Some Day Your Witch Will Come* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 34-35.
- ²³ Jessica Lamb-Shapiro, *Promise Land*, 124-125.
- ²⁴ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 177.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

Postcard

It is with a measure of irony that I have come to a new understanding of the works I set out to study, Wollstonecraft's *Letters* and Gilbert's *EPL*.

I now recognize that Gilbert, the woman who grew to know herself so very well, has assumed a mantle of authority to promote a story of travel that is more illusion than reality. The answer to unhappiness is not merely to travel and not everyone who travels finds God, a husband, meaning, purpose, and satisfaction let alone a new life filled with fame and fortune.

Wollstonecraft, the woman I thought had failed to develop a full sense of self after she travelled to Scandinavia, knew herself more thoroughly and more honestly than I realized. She called herself "Cassandra" and she had a disturbing vision of what was to come if wealth became the predominant operating system for the world.

It has and the world continues to grapple with many of the same injustices Wollstonecraft addressed.

Wollstonecraft challenged reigning ideologies and the status quo of women whereas Gilbert perpetuates the very structures that have denied women equal standing socially, politically, and economically.

I underestimated the intellectual importance and breadth of vision in Wollstonecraft's *Letters* when I began and I overestimated the spiritual significance and magnanimity of purpose in Gilbert's *EPL*.

I underestimated Wollstonecraft's travel memoir because it's tempting in contemporary times to simplify a narrative and the temptation in the *Letters* is to see Wollstonecraft as a woman who travelled to mend her broken heart.

I overestimated Gilbert's travel memoir because it's tempting in contemporary times to grasp for meaning and the temptation in *EPL* is to see Gilbert as a woman who travelled and discovered all the answers.

The value of my effort in studying the work of Wollstonecraft and Gilbert is to say, as they did, that I questioned, I searched, I learned, and that the outcome of my journey has been to recognize that this is the never-ending cycle of the technologies of the self.

References

- Birkett, Dea. *Off the Beaten Track. Three Centuries of Women Travellers*. London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004.
- . *Spinsters Abroad. Victorian Lady Explorers*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1991.
- Blanton, Casey. *Travel Writing: The Self and The World*. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997.
- Brekke, Tone and Jon Mee. Introduction to *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* by Mary Wollstonecraft, ix-xxviii. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . Appendix 5 to *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* by Mary Wollstonecraft, 157-165. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Buus, Stephanie. "Bound for Scandinavia: Mary Wollstonecraft's Promethean Journey." In *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*. Edited by Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, 221-239. *Stockholm Studies in English* XCIX. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003.
- Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*. London: Vintage Books, 2006.
- . *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. London: Virago Press, 2009.
- Dolan, Brian. *Ladies of the Grand Tour. British Women in Pursuit of Enlightenment and Adventure in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- "Eat, Pray, Love." *Elizabeth Gilbert*. Accessed May 26, 2015.
<http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/books/eat-pray-love/>
- Facebook, Inc. "Elizabeth Gilbert's Facebook page." Accessed January 29, 2014.
<https://www.facebook.com/GilbertLiz/posts/10202105575613913>.
- Foucault, Michel. "Technologies of the Self." In *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton, 16-49. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

- Frederick, Bonnie and Virginia Hyde. Introduction to *Women and the Journey: The Female Travel Experience*. Edited by Bonnie Frederick and Susan H. McLeod, xvii-xxxiii. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1993.
- Freud, Sigmund. *On Dreams*. Edited and translated by James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1989.
- Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Committed. A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*. New York: Viking, 2010.
- . *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- . <http://www.elizabethgilbert.com>
- . *Ideas at the House*. By Caroline Baum. Sydney Opera House, January 19, 2013.
- . "The First Step To Long-Lasting Happiness." *oprah.com* from *O, The Oprah Magazine*. July 2014. <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/How-to-Be-Happier-Elizabeth-Gilbert>.
- . *Woman's Hour*. By Jeni Murray. BBC Radio 4, September 22, 2010.
- Gottesman, Ron. General Editor's Statement to *Travel Writing: The Self and The World* by Casey Blanton, vii-viii. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing A Woman's Life*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.
- Hutton, Patrick H. "Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self". In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton, 121-144. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Krznaric, Roman. "How To Start An Empathy Revolution." TEDxAthens YouTube video. 17:14. January 28, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT5X6NIJR88>.
- Kuczynski, Ingrid. "'Only By The Eye' - Visual Perception in Women's Travel Writing in the 1790s." In *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, edited by Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, 25-52. *Stockholm Studies in English* XCIX. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003.
- Lamb-Shapiro, Jessica. *Promise Land: My Journey Through America's Self-Help Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

- Martin, Luther H., Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds. *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Mayer, John. Q. By Jian Ghomeshi. 88.1 CBC FM, September 2, 2013.
- McGee, Micki. *Self-Help, Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Morris, Mary with Larry O'Connor, ed. *The Illustrated Virago Book of Women Travellers*. London: Virago Press, 2003.
- Mullan, John, Barbara Taylor, and Karen O'Brien. *In Our Time*. By Melvyn Bragg, "Mary Wollstonecraft." BBC Radio 4, December 31, 2009. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00pg5dr>.
- Penguin Random House. "Trends in Consumer Book Buying." *Slideshare*. October 4, 2013. <http://www.slideshare.net/PenguinRandomHouse/consumer-book-buying-trends>.
- Porter, Dennis. *Haunted Journeys. Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Publishers Weekly. "Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear." www.publishersweekly.com. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-59463-471-0>
- Russell, Mary. *The Blessings of a Good Thick Skirt. Women Travellers and Their World*. London: Collins, 1986.
- Ryall, Anka. "A Vindication of Struggling Nature: Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavia." In *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, edited by Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, 118-137. *Stockholm Studies in English* XCIX. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003.
- Ryall, Anka and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, eds. *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays. Stockholm Studies in English, XCIX*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003.
- . Introduction to *Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*, edited by Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, 1-21. *Stockholm Studies in English, XCIX*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003.
- Siegel, Kristi. *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999.

- Steinke, Darcey. "Elizabeth Gilbert." *Darcey Steinke's Blog*. January 28, 2014, <http://www.darceysteinke.com/2014/01/28/elizabeth-gilbert/>.
- Stone, Kay. "Walt Disney's Americanization of the *Marchen*." In *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, 24-35. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008.
- Todd, Janet. *Mary Wollstonecraft - A Revolutionary Life*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Edited by Tone Brekke and Jon Mee. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Four Figures: III Mary Wollstonecraft." In *The Common Reader Second Series*, 156-163. London: The Hogarth Press, 1974.
- Zipes, Jack. *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. New York: Routledge, 2006.