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# Hermeneutic Keys for Reading Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark by Mary Wollstonecraft

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## Abstract

This article offers a hermeneutic reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, drawing extensively on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative identity. It moves beyond classifying the text as either pure recollection or fiction, arguing instead that it constitutes a profound process of narrative refiguration. This process continuously negotiates the tension between a fixed, sameness-based identity (*idem*) and a dynamic, self-making identity (*ipse*), thereby revealing the intricate interplay between the personal and the cultural in self-formation. The analysis situates Wollstonecraft's journey within the dialectic of selfhood and otherness, demonstrating how her encounters with unfamiliar landscapes, languages, and social customs become essential occasions for hermeneutic self-understanding. The paper pays special attention to Ricoeur's notions of attestation and distanciation (the productive gap between experience and telling), while also considering the reader's role as a constitutive moment in the work's truth-claims. Ultimately, it argues that by intertwining raw personal testimony with a performative self-presentation, Wollstonecraft transforms the epistolary form into a unique space of introspection and a projection toward future possibilities, offering a seminal exploration of the conditions under which the self is narrated, recognized, and transformed.

**Keywords:** narrative, hermeneutics, self-understanding, writting, travelogue, letters

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## Introduction

This article aims to systematize Paul Ricoeur's philosophical theory of narrative identity in order to construct a theoretical framework that not only justifies but also enriches the interpretation of a particular work in which the author's identity is deeply interwoven. Our objective is not to engage with Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self for the sake of advancing a philosophical reflection on his thought, but rather to place this reflection in the service of interpreting a historical text that resists clear generic classification. We refer to Mary Wollstonecraft's final work published during her lifetime: *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark,*[1] released in 1796.

As we will explore in detail, this is a text that demands interpretation. It features the author herself as the central figure, recounting a journey she actually undertook during a particularly intense and introspective period of her life—one marked by the acceleration of her psychological complexity. Undoubtedly, this narrative enacts a dual movement of revealing and concealing the identity of its author and narrator, offering a privileged occasion to witness the narrative strategies through which Wollstonecraft shapes her sense of self.

To carry out such a reading, we begin by establishing the Ricoeurian perspective that will provide us with the necessary philosophical tools. At the end of *Time and Narrative III* (1988), Ricoeur introduces the question of narrative identity, understood as the *locus* where the two types of narrative explored in that work —fiction and historical writing— converge. He writes:

> the fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity. Here 'identity' is taken in the sense of a practical category. (246)

However, he does not pursue a deep philosophical inquiry into the specific problems of identity as applied to persons or communities in that volume. Although the notion of ipseity is mentioned, it is only in *Oneself as Another* (1992) that we find a fully developed dialectic that will underpin Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology. This dialectic will later be revisited

in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) and *The Course of Recognition* (2005), especially in relation to the continuities and tensions between the personal and collective spheres.

Accordingly, this article unfolds in two parts. First, we will delve into Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, with particular emphasis on the concept of identity and its epistemological claim, namely, attestation. Second, we will contextualize Wollstonecraft's *Letters* within the biographical moment of its production, and then trace the narrative threads of her identity using Ricoeur's theory as our guide.

## 1. Narrative Identity and Attestation in Paul Ricoeur

The question 'Who am I?' has traditionally preoccupied philosophy, particularly from Descartes to Nietzsche, and through thinkers such as Locke, Hume, Davidson, and Parfit in the twentieth century, accumulating perplexities and aporias. Ricoeur introduces a crucial distinction that allows him to shift the focus of the analysis and breathe new life into the problem of identity. His interest in reclaiming the work and epistemology of history—by distinguishing it from fiction—leads him to formulate a point of articulation between these two kinds of narrative: the space of personal and collective experience, the locus of individual or communal identification.

Departing from the substantialist theses of traditional anthropology and metaphysics, Ricoeur argues that we do not have direct access to a self that we could grasp by describing an invariant core of traits. Rather, identity is attained through the mediation of narrative. In his well-known critique of the Cartesian cogito, Ricoeur questions the move Descartes makes to avoid solipsism—namely, shifting from the affirmation of existence to an inquiry into what the self is. Ricoeur proposes, instead, that the more appropriate question is not 'what am I?' but 'who am I?'—a question that resists definitive answers and unfolds only through the ongoing narrative of a life.

This narrative, necessary to mediate between cosmic time—anchored in the weight of the calendar—and the imaginative time capable of producing unlimited variations, is not mere fiction. Although it employs literary strategies characteristic of fictional narrative, the plot is mimetic: it

imitates and refigures real human action. Not without risk —since we remain within the paradigm of suspicion— narrative identity, Ricoeur claims, 'must be the unified style of subjective transformations governed by the objective transformations that obey the rule for the completeness, totality, and unity of the plot' (2016, 234-5).

For Ricoeur, there is a correlative relationship between identity and the discordant concordance of the narrative to which it belongs. Narratology has gradually revealed this link by demonstrating the reciprocity between plot and character, as well as the instabilities that threaten this balance. Literature, in Ricoeur's view, serves as evidence for his philosophical proposal. Thus, the relation between narrative and identity is not rigid but rather dynamic, characterized by shifting degrees of correspondence.

The identity of the character in the narrative plot offers an opportunity for the refiguration of the reader's selfhood in the act of reading. This transfer from a referential to a refigurative framework —adopting the paradigm of reading to address the problem of personal identity— marks a turning point in hermeneutic philosophy. The real subject appropriates the meanings embodied in a fictional character and, through identification, imaginatively experiments with the possibilities of their own self. This is why Ricoeur attributes such importance to cultural signs, among which literature is emblematic. Narrative intelligence, developed through engagement with such signs, is a necessary condition for a creative and rich appropriation of the meanings that constitute our symbolic environment. Engaging with a text means confronting the world it unfolds and appropriating its meanings in such a way that reading not only refigures the sense of the text but also allows for a deeper self-understanding through the refiguration of the self by narrative.

Consequently, narrative identity —according to the model of the plot that mediates between permanence and change— constitutes itself over time through the dynamic configuration of a story that defines the identity of a character. In this sense, we narrate ourselves under the regime of the *Er-Erzählung* —we construct a story about ourselves and, through

that story, we come to understand ourselves. In other words, we associate the anecdotal mutability of life with the configuration of a story, thus creating a text in which we read ourselves and open the possibility of self-understanding. This does not presuppose a subject, since Ricoeur resists essentialist and substantialist ontologies; understanding is configurative, and imagination is productive of the self.

At this point, we can fully grasp the axial distinction Ricoeur proposes to address the problem of the self in terms of identity. In the expression 'oneself', the issue of identity is contained in the word 'self', which must be understood in a complex way, articulating two distinct meanings of identity: *idem* and *ipse*, that is, sameness and selfhood. This distinction between the two main uses of the concept of identity provides the conceptual framework of Ricoeur's analysis. On one hand, *idem* refers to extreme similarity, such as when we say two objects are identical; its opposite is difference. Personal identity, however, does not follow this logic, because extreme similarity implies an immutable core of selfhood, which remains inaccessible. On the other hand, *ipse* refers to what is proper to oneself, and its dialectical counterpart is the other; hence the title *Oneself as Another*.

Narrative personal identity, as conceived in the hermeneutics of the self, allows us to register the constancy of change within a framework of persistence that yields identity in terms of continuity. As Romano describes:

> Selfhood consists in a kind of self-maintaining (*maintien de soi-même*) despite all the empirical changes that affect one's 'character', a 'constancy' that does not rest on the persistence of an identity. Selfhood is not a substance-like type of permanence, but a 'mode of being' which is to be understood on the model of a promise (…) This is why selfhood does not belong to truth in a theoretical sense, but to truth understood in an *existential* sense, to the confidence of which we render ourselves worthy, to *trustworthiness*. (2016, 46)

This does not mean rejecting elements of *idem*, which Ricoeur associates with character, but rather proposing a model that captures the complexity of the dialectic between what endures and what changes—a dynamic that expands the polysemy of existence. 'Ricoeur's entire philosophical enterprise hinges on the condition that the referential framework needs to

be replaced by a refigurative one. To put it simply, by "refiguration" Ricoeur means the refiguration of lived life through narratives' (Lénárt-Cheng 2016, 359). Since the opposition between being and non-being no longer serves as a criterion, the subject is not lost in the narrative; instead, the narrative reveals the nakedness of the question 'Who am I?'

This nakedness, in a way, undermines the traditional opposition between truth and falsehood in relation to identity. Attestation, rather than truth, is the original epistemological status that Ricoeur attributes to the hermeneutics of the self. Attestation is the assurance and confidence each person has in existing in the mode of selfhood|ipseity; as such, it does not admit a purely epistemic dispute. Yet attestation is not certainty, but a non-doxastic belief. Ricoeur draws on the French language to underscore this distinction. *Croyance* refers to belief or opinion expressed in propositions like 'I believe that…,' whereas *créance* refers to trust or credit, expressed in propositions like 'I believe in…' or 'I have faith in…' Consequently, the epistemological mode of selfhood is testimony.

What does it mean, then, to 'attest selfhood'? It means to affirm the ascription of psychic predicates to both oneself and others; the capacity to initiate something in the world; the responsibility for our own actions; the need for discourse to be interpreted; the illocutionary force of language. Ultimately, we attest to the capacity of language to speak being, and to our own capacity as capable, productive beings. Unlike the sciences, which seek verifiable truths, attestation coordinates the phenomenology of 'I can' with the semantics of action through the assurance and trust that arise from our pre-understanding of practical engagement in a workable world. The 'I can' can only be attested (Ricoeur 1991c, 391).

Thus, attestation has a double direction: toward events—i.e., actions carried out by an agent that affect the world—and toward the very existence of the capable human being, who simultaneously attests to themselves by narrating these events. In this self-designation, Ricoeur locates the ontological space of capability. By attesting to the self in and through the attestation of events|actions that we cause or

endure, the metaphysical space is opened to think a philosophical anthropology of the capable human being, as Ricoeur conceives it. This involves an original fragmentation that does not point to a being—as one might think in Platonic or Aristotelian terms—but to an excess, to a background that is both potential and actual: that which is, and has the power to be.

Attestation demands an act of trust and credit that cannot be refuted, because nothing can close its crisis of confidence. Where there is attestation, suspicion is also possible; we can only halt doubt by finding a testimony that appears more reliable—at least provisionally. But attestation is even more particular, for it is not merely epistemological.

In Ricoeur's philosophical trajectory, particularly in his 1990 work, the semantics of analytic philosophy gives him the confidence that the transition from analysis to ontology does not require abandoning the ground of language:

> Attestation, for me, constitutes the epistemic modality of the ontological vehemence that, I believe, continues to inhabit the semantics of analytic philosophy. It designates non-doxastic belief, security without verifiable certainty, the confidence that human acting is indeed the case. (Ricoeur 1991c, 396)

Attestation thus represents the modality by which phenomenology points toward ontology. Ricoeur proposes thinking ontology in terms of the mode of being of what appears, taking as attested that events happen and that we are a self. Yet this attestation is not a simplification of epistemological problems; rather, it opens a new dimension of truth that best suits the mode of appearance of the self, without aspiring to totalization. If language speaks being, and the identity of the self arises from narrative, then it is within that very narrative that we can find the keys to an ontology of action and of agents as capable beings.

To answer the question of what kind of being the self is, Ricoeur draws on Aristotle's notion of the polysemy of being. However, in the distinction between true and false being proposed in the *Metaphysics*, what remains unthought is the very attestation that bears witness to the gap between reflection and analysis. This testimony, grounded in

attestation, carries the conviction that language, regardless of use, speaks being —more specifically, the true being of the self[2]. Attestation opposes the claim to truth not as its mere contrary but as a means through which truth, in the form of ipseity|selfhood, is reached. In the end, attestation is the assurance of existing in the mode of selfhood|ipseity, as an acting and suffering being.

This may appear to be an easy way out of the problem of knowledge and truth, allowing us —without guarantees— to affirm our own existence, that of others, and of events. However, this conception of certainty as attestation expands our cognitive capacities by enabling trust in our pre-understanding of the world. In fact, suspicion envelops the entirety of existence, as everything attested may be questioned. 'Ricoeur observes that everyday practice of testimony (…) consists in a continuous effort to maintain the unstable balance between trust and suspicion. (…) Suspicion means that wherever there is attestation, there may also be contestation' (Begué 2006, 87).

As is evident, there is no foundational subject underlying this assurance, which corresponds to the phenomenological distinction between *idem* and *ipse*. No criteria grounded in *idem* can eliminate the element of suspicion inherent in attestation. Attestation comes to the self, and thus selfhood|ipseity implies a fundamental reference to otherness, to an elsewhere from which the force of attestation comes —that is, a mode of passivity. In this sense, it stands equidistant from both poles of the cogito debate: the self-founding certainty and the humiliation of illusion. Suspicion is not absolute; neither is certainty.

To summarize, attestation cannot be reduced to epistemological determinations alone; it is also an ontological determination of being. By drawing on analytic philosophy to adopt a realist turn, Ricoeur aims to resist phenomenological idealism without reducing everything to the empirical. The ontological aim of the claim that 'language speaks being', together with attestation, is to reach —through the objectifying mediations of language—an extralinguistic plane that remains dependent on linguistic determinations. This interdependence

prevents the reduction of reality to language, a risk inherent in the linguistic turn that fails to explain the efficacy of action. It is necessary to 'affirm the dependence of the linguistic determinations of action upon the ontological constitution of action' (Ricoeur 1992, 301).

## 2. The Narrative Identity of Mary Wollstonecraft in her Letters

By the late twentieth century, the category of 'life writing' had emerged within the human and social sciences to address, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the instability and hybrid nature of autobiographical texts, enabling the delineation of a dynamic canon that includes autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters, and other ostensibly amorphous writings. The consideration of this new category has had the effect, in eighteenth-century studies of self-representation, of shifting women from the margins to the center of attention, thereby revaluing works such as Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, by an author who, until only a few decades ago, was almost entirely absent from literature and history curricula. It is in this conceptual light that we use the term autobiography for the analysis of this work. Thus, Myers asserts that the *Letters* constitute "a kind of subjective autobiography superimposed on a travelogue" (1979, 166), a form of self-representation that is part of an emergent canon of the time. A contemporary reading can recognize the centrality of the personal gaze and voice in the epistemic grounding of the narration. Of course, as Bourdieu argues in *L'illusion biographique*, it is absurd to attempt to understand a life story as a series of events whose constant is a subject, a proper name, because

> we can only comprehend a trajectory (…) on condition that we have first constructed the successive states of the field in which it was carried out, and hence, the whole set of objective relations that have linked the agent in question to the other agents engaged in the same field and confronted with the same space of possibles. (Bourdieu 1986, 72)

This reflection underscores another virtue of the epistolary text: it is always opening outward, beyond itself, through its direct reference to a correspondent. For this reason,

we begin by tracing the networks and interwoven threads that constitute the context in which the *Letters* were written and later published —without losing sight of the fact that other configurations yield other possible readings.

As is well known, Mary Wollstonecraft settled in Paris at the end of 1792, with the aim of reporting on events related to the French Revolution for an English periodical, shortly before the beginning of the Jacobin Terror. There she fell in love with an American merchant, Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a passionate romance. The relationship resulted in the birth, in May 1794, in the port city of Le Havre, of her first daughter, Frances "Fanny" Imlay. Yet Gilbert soon revealed his scant interest in conjugal life and fatherhood; back in London, he declared that he would 'try to do his duty by her and his daughter (…) but he expected to retain his freedom in all ways' (Gordon 2016, 289). For Wollstonecraft, this indifference and lack of love was merely the latest in a long chain of frustrations, painful heartbreaks, disillusionments, sufferings, and complications. She experienced what would, without doubt, today be described as a severe depression, which led to her first suicide attempt by taking poison.

In an unorthodox response to this attempt, Imlay proposed that Mary travel to Scandinavia on his behalf in search of a Norwegian vessel —long since untraceable— carrying a cargo of Bourbon silver he had smuggled from France to Sweden when they were still living in Le Havre. Even more unorthodox was Mary's acceptance of the task: she set out on the journey with Fanny, barely a year old, and the French nurse Marguerite[3]. Without apparent success in locating the stolen ship, she arrived in Gothenburg two months later, hoping for some sort of reconciliation with Imlay, but found only absence and rejection. Back in London, she learned that Imlay was living with another lover[4], and she decided to end her life a second time —this time by throwing herself into the Thames from Putney Bridge on 10 October 1795. Unfortunately —or fortunately— she was rescued by fishermen, drawn by the prospect of claiming a lucrative reward recently instituted by the Royal Humane Society for saving would-be suicides from the river. Although for a brief period Imlay agreed to share a

home with her, his new partner soon insisted on ending this arrangement, and together they traveled to Paris. For Wollstonecraft, this marked a closure and, finally, the beginning of a new editorial project.

> She would not fictionalize her experience. Instead, she would edit her letters from Scandinavia and turn her broken heart into a book that would honestly examine her struggle with despair. It would be a travelogue and reflection, an observation and self-examination. (Gordon 2016, 340)

What is striking about this project is that, in a move we might today call Ricoeurian, Wollstonecraft positions herself in a liminal space between fiction and reality with the aim of blurring the boundary between them, discursively crafting her projection into a narrator who, as a character within the plot, allows her to experiment with her thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The inhospitable geographical context seems designed precisely for this exploration, in which alterity emerges —more than ever— as an ontological category constitutive of the *self*. Few people at the time had travelled to the north of Europe, and even fewer were women travelling without male company and with a one-year-old baby. Wollstonecraft is foreign because she is English, but also because she is a woman, an intellectual on a business trip, and because she does not speak the local language.

In just over two and a half years, Mary Wollstonecraft lived in Paris and reported on the course of the French Revolution, fell in love, had a daughter, attempted suicide twice, travelled through three Nordic countries, moved at least three times, published at least two books (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* in 1792, and *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe*, 1794), and began working on a new book that would also prove a publishing success. The heterogeneity of these experiences —political, emotional, philosophical, psychological, erotic, ethical, professional, social, among others— demanded a synthesis: precarious and fragile, but a synthesis nonetheless. We could call this, following Ricoeur, the synthesis of the heterogeneous: the

gathering into a plot of a plurality of disruptive events that seem to fragment personal life experience. It is the attempt to strike a certain balance between a pure ipseity | selfhood, in which identity is eclipsed, and the monotony of a life that is always merely re-identifiable. Yet the paradox sustaining this narrative practice —which grants meaning, cohesion, and concordance to what appears discordant— is that, while it is our own experience, in which we have material and symbolic belonging, it nevertheless requires a moment of distance. 'Distantiation is the condition of understanding' (Ricoeur 1991a, 88) and writing both enables and produces this productive hermeneutical distance. It is no minor point that such a chaotic set of experiences should drive Wollstonecraft to despair and at the same time demand narration and writing from her.

In the case of the work under discussion, this narration or writing has a first moment of configuration: the period when she writes her letters and diary entries during her stay in the Nordic countries. There is a lapse between this initial writing and the rewriting carried out in collaboration with her publisher, Joseph Johnson, for the book's publication. This latter stage involves Wollstonecraft reading her own words with the aim of refiguring them, appropriating their meaning and steering it toward new interests, while preserving the need to remain the protagonist, to split herself into the narrator.

As we have seen, Ricoeur argues that we have no direct access to ourselves and that narrating ourselves is a way of arriving at an understanding of our being, through the construction—or better, co-construction—of our identity as the correlate of a plot. This proves a fruitful key for approaching texts such as Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, which are spaces for the exploration of meaning and occasions for reflection that seek to probe the complexity of the author's mode of being. Wollstonecraft asks herself, time and again, about the qualities that distinguish her, about the particularity of her character and her life experience, in search of that mysterious personal quality that makes her *her*. It is therefore not surprising that this question runs through all her works and that she herself declared she was the heroine of every story

she wrote, which allows us to affirm that her entire *œuvre* is, in some way, autobiographical—from political essays to fiction. 'She had insisted that her work be a metonym for herself and had aimed at projecting an intensely attractive personality to her readers' (Todd 1998, 186). We therefore understand this autobiographical quality as the textual actualization of a performative identity—an identity that acts and attests, that always arrives at self-understanding through meaningful action as text. Accordingly, as both Yousef (1999, 537) and Culley (2014, 180) argue, this construction of narrative subjectivity cannot be read in a Romantic key—that is, as an isolated, self-sufficient self that finds peace in its autonomy. On the contrary, Wollstonecraft weaves her narrative within an intersubjective context, showing that her self-knowledge is always relational, despite the relative solitude in which she carries out her journey.

In the *Letters*, this relationship embraces the foreignness and alterity of the other as a banner. The narrative constructs her own identity in relation to what she finds strange on her journey. 'Travellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home' (Wollstonecraft 2024, 190), she warns in Letter III, as if encountering alterity were the very expectation —the desirable aim— of her itinerary. From personal hygiene to a society's collective capacity for science and its appreciation for the refinement of art and literature, these are seen as characteristics corresponding to a particular stage of development —one she can interpret because she belongs to a wealthier and more complex society. Her interpretation of this alterity is key to understanding her self, for it is an affirmation of her identity. In Letter VII, Wollstonecraft reinforces this constant scrutiny of her new cultural environments or describes her impressions of Scandinavian nature and society, relating them to her own feelings and convictions. This contrast with 'the other' (customs, landscapes, climate) can be explored through Ricoeur's concepts of alterity and the quest for recognition, since her identity is constructed in relation to what she observes and to those she meets. Attestation presents this double movement: giving an account of action, and, in the same

gesture, giving an account of the self's capacity to affirm itself. We must not forget that alterity is constitutive of identity in its dialectic with ipseity|selfhood. Wollstonecraft's narrative is entangled in the stories of others, but also in History, and the author is acutely aware of the fruitfulness of this link. She therefore presents herself through her act of travelling, which is also a metaphor for life as an awareness of a polysemic process in full development.

References to Wollstonecraft's private life[5] are interwoven —often obliquely— into the rewriting process, which is itself shaped by editorial purposes, and must therefore be read transversally. For example, in Letter I she refers to her exhausted spirit, attributing it partly to the conditions of travel but also to 'other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted' (2024, 173). Undoubtedly, these 'other causes' relate to private matters she does not wish to disclose, yet neither does she seek to erase them, as though the mere hint of undisclosed circumstances were itself part of the enigma of the plot—an enigma in which readers can only surmise suffering, pain, labour, and conflict. Similarly, in Letter X she recounts a dream in which her daughter's footprints in the sand—her traces—become a nascent hope that can muse away despair, just as walking along the rocks allows her to imagine happiness and exclaim: 'Phantoms of bliss! … again enclose me in your magic circle, and wipe clear from my remembrance the disappointments that render the sympathy painful, which experience rather increases than damps, by giving the indulgence of feeling the sanction of reason' (2024, 210). This despair and these disappointments, to which Wollstonecraft explicitly alludes, anchor the narrative in the lived experience of the author. There is also a performative dimension in the rhetoric, which calls for empathy—inviting a reading that is not merely passive but engaged, refusing to remain neutral. This is the proposition of an intersubjectivity mediated by a text that articulates writing and reading in a productive way. In the double distancing —on the one hand, of author from narrator, and on the other, of reader from the 'I' imaginatively unfolded before the text— emerges the space in which interpretation occurs and polyphony takes place.

It is crucial that a hermeneutics of Wollstonecraft's text assume such distancing as a condition. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur maintains that the art of narrative confirms the primacy of the third person in the knowledge of the human, since the 'I' is that about which we speak, the hero of a narrative plot. The question 'who tells?' in the case of *lifewriting* seems to forge a special bond between author and narrator. However, for Ricoeur, the autobiographical account of the self narrating itself is no more valid than the narration of another, for narrative mediation necessarily entails distancing.

In this sense, any author gives testimony of themselves when narrating— whether narrating their own life or that of another person. Yet if we deny the self's exclusive privilege in the construction of the 'I', we might be tempted to assume that autobiography is an impossible genre— or at least a limit case. It is therefore important to gauge the expectations that make autobiography impossible, so that within new aims it might find its own path and legitimacy. Let us recall that autobiographies are works or textual products (conceived in both the broad and the narrow sense of text) which, 'as Ricoeur said in many of his Works (…) cast free from the author's intentions and its initial context' (Abel 2009, vii). The 'auto' particle becomes contentious precisely because it is both an attempt to anchor the narrative in its author and context of production, and a space for challenging the very notion of author— more still, of self-narration. Becoming a character in one's own text is to split oneself in writing, where the self narrates the I and thereby produces it.

To be an author in the context of an autobiographical narrative turns the genre into a kind of *auto-hetero-biography*: a story of oneself as another. Autobiography, consequently, is a documented testimony which —given the lack of ontological identification between author, narrator, and narrative— produces a surplus of meaning.[6] We cannot, therefore, expect autobiography to produce a narrative that corresponds, in a mirror-like way, to an identity in the sense of sameness. On the contrary, it is a quest for understanding that requires interpretation, one that the self addresses both to itself and to others. This does not, however, preclude other interpretations;

rather, each reading places the self before the text, opening the possibility —at best— of being transformed by the world it unfolds. Mary Wollstonecraft was only considered a feminist philosopher almost a century after her death, since the reading of her work was mediated by the interpretation of her husband William Godwin, who posthumously published, in 1798, his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

> Godwin's Memoirs were so con troversial that he was forced to issue a second, revised edition in the same year. Southey wrote that he lacked "all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked," through disclosures about her father's violence, her romantic relationships and the gynecological details of her death (…) Godwin's frank portrayal (…) has been blamed for the subsequent disfiguration of her name. (Rajan 2000, 511)

That Mary is not mere fiction, but neither is she the only Mary. Mary is also the way in which she chose to present herself in her works, what she edited, or what she preferred not to include. These decisions are also part of Mary Wollstonecraft and constitute her. And they undoubtedly speak to us about our own narratives, our journeys, our hidden miseries, and our secrets that we hint at but do not share. Augustine had already identified in his *Confessions*, when traversing the palaces of his memory, that which one does not remember, that which is not shown, but which nonetheless constitutes us.

Lejeune argues that what sustains an autobiography has to do with a pact between author and reader that aims at the authenticity of the work; that is, it refers to the life of a real person from an alternate perspective. This pact stands before a notion of truth close to that of testimony and clearly rests on what Ricoeur calls attestation. The incorporation of the reader as a decisive moment in the very possibility of autobiography allows us to maintain the preeminence of the third person in the theory of narrative identity in the very capacity of the narrative to be erected as an auto-. Alterity appears once again in the interaction implied by the discursive practice itself with a third party who receives it as a testimony of existence. Now, a constitutive element of attestation is the unquenchable suspicion that there is no possible identification between the self recounted and its I: the self always exceeds. Thus, Wollstonecraft's testimony remains within the sphere of truth

as attestation, thanks to these traces of her experience that provide the emotional anchoring of the narrative.

In Letter IX, Mary concludes with a reflection on human happiness, debating whether it is to be associated with the brutality of a state as close as possible to the savage, founded on unconscious ignorance, or with the excitement of a mind devoted to the cultivation of the arts and sciences. She sets into play two valuations of nature: one positive, associated with the ingenuousness and simple beauty of the landscape with which human beings relate pragmatically; another negative, due to the scarcity of means of subsistence and the exhausting boredom of feelings produced by unblemished simplicity. She situates herself between the two, as she knows firsthand the limitations of both conceptions and stages: 'I bury myself in the woods, but find it necessary to emerge again, that I may not lose sight of the wisdom and virtue which exalts my nature' (2024, 206). Karen Hurst maintains that the reference to landscapes is a strategy to address a traditional identification —which Wollstonecraft finds problematic— between the feminine and nature. She positions herself equidistant from nature as a chaotic and alienating force to be mastered, and nature as the transcendence of a literary beauty to be contemplated.

> Wollstonecraft affirms her own power as a part of nature, offering an alternative to her society's containment of the feminine by writing into creation a landscape that rings not with fears of feminine chaos, and not with a hollow silence, but with the strong voices of mother and daughter. (Hust 1996, 498)

Beyond the enormous burden and responsibility that motherhood entails, as attested by her private letters, Wollstonecraft chooses, in her daydreams inspired by landscapes, to present herself as a mother who reads in her daughter the possibility of inhabiting the world outside the false dichotomy of civilization and savagery, of good nature and bad nature. In the narrative, therefore, there is not only the attestation of one's own existence, but also the affirmation of the capacity to imagine a new relationship between the feminine and nature. In a constant interweaving of thought and experience, 'the laws of nature as she felt them —equality,

perfectibility— can eventually influence society' (Hust 1996, 498). In this sense, Fanny's footprints in the sand, to which we have already referred, are a new hope, the possibility of a future that counters the hopeless present. While Todd interprets that what we obtain in the *Letters* are outbursts of the prototypical sentimental mother of fiction, we believe that the author allows herself to experiment with her experiences and to prioritise the closure into which this journey and this book converge, leaning enthusiastically toward the future. Literature, as Ricoeur tells us, is a laboratory of imaginative variations for the reading self, but it is also so for the writing self—not only in the case of fiction, in which the variations are more obvious, but also when we reinterpret, recut, re-signify, and refigure our own experience. Writing is also the occasion to recount once more and to give new meaning to what has been lived.

> When we 'write self', however we do it… we track the elusive and shifting traces of the person who bears our name. The *self* part and the *writing* part are inextricably bound together, for when it comes to self, we cannot help but make what we say we find. (Eakin 2020, 108)

Thus, Wollstonecraft not only inscribes herself in time, but also projects herself toward a future in which she attests to her condition as a capable being, and constructs herself through narrative.

## 3. Conclusion

As has been shown, the *Letters* allow for a hermeneutic analysis in which self-narration is not merely an act of memory, but a constant refiguration that gradually reveals a complex identity—both personal and cultural. It is a work in which Wollstonecraft takes on the task of inquiring into her identity, of knowing herself, and of recognising herself as capable of a construction that many never achieve: 'What a long time it requires to know ourselves; and yet almost every one has more of this knowledge than he is willing to own, even to himself' (Wollstonecraft 2024, 206). This is only a small sample of the potential of a Ricoeurian reading of the *Letters*. In the editing of her letters, Wollstonecraft finds both the register and the discursive genre that provide her with the

freedom and the structure necessary to express herself as faithfully as possible to her own self and to her concerns. From the perspective of Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, we see how Wollstonecraft seeks to understand herself in relation both to her external world (the landscape, the people she meets) and to her own memories and past experiences, allowing her to narrate herself as a story. The *Letters* illustrate vividly how self-narrative is constructed and reconfigured in response to experiences and contexts, moving within the dialectic between idem-identity and ipse-identity — between the self as a stable subject and the self that changes and responds to events. Wollstonecraft wrote incessantly, often more concerned with expressing an inner reality than with the interests of her addressees. In her letters we can apprehend her thoughts, emotions, and sensations: 'She was concerned to get herself across to herself as well as to both private recipients and public readership, whatever the cost' (Todd 2002, 9). The letters are a space of communion with herself, in which Mary becomes a character of her own making and through which she can process her experiences, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. The kind of truth to which Wollstonecraft's epistolary writing is committed is that which arises from the narration of her own experience, and thus her writing is intensely personal and testimonial. *Letters*, 'unlike a diary or retrospective, they record not a finished ordered life but the dynamic process of living and experiencing, and inevitably they tell a tale no biography can truly match' (Todd 2002, 22). We do not seek to lose sight of the distanciation that ensures there is no primacy of the first person, as Ricoeur affirms, but rather to understand the unique contribution of each interpretation and narration.

Beyond the information Wollstonecraft seeks to conceal, her accounts bear witness to herself, affirm her existence, and demand *créance*. Ricoeur's notion of attestation is especially useful in grasping the claim to truth in a work like this. The narrative is sustained by first-hand testimony; an attestation which, through certain intimate details and personal information the author allows to emerge, affirms her experience as a warrant.

Likewise, the reading of the *Letters* gives us Wollstonecraft embodied in an emotional life within an exuberant nature. The author transfigures her emotion so as to enable the movement from the embodied to the abstract, from the body to consciousness, with the aim of producing an active reading experience that exposes the self to the text and invites a response—almost as if the text were asking about the possibility of a shared interpretation of a feeling. Wollstonecraft reflects on her emotions, personal challenges, and desires in the midst of solitude, conscious that her account has both a personal dimension and a performative one, seeking to have an impact beyond the text. As we have seen, Ricoeur argues that narrative identity is configured in the act of telling and reinterpreting one's own story, and the *Letters* illustrate how Wollstonecraft reconstructs her experiences not only to reflect on her past, but also to better understand her present and to project her capacities and possibilities into the future.

Above all, 'Throughout *Short Residence* the letter writer cycles back to the question that organizes her first reverie: is she a solitary traveler, "a particle broken off from the great mass of mankind," or "a part of the mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself?"' (Favret 2002, 225). Undoubtedly, these letters negotiate a balance between her singularity and exceptionality and her belonging to a collective she cannot entirely reject. The striking beauty of the Norwegian night landscapes becomes the stage for the enunciation of an active principle that keeps her from sleep. The sadness and nostalgia of her contextual assessment, the emotional agony of the suffering with which she lives, make her feel more alive than ever: 'I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not severe myself' (Wollstonecraft 2024, 177). In seeking herself in writing, Wollstonecraft does not encounter the limits of her identity, but rather the network of narratives from which she cannot detach herself and from which, she recognises, she draws a vital energy that gives her perspective and defines her.

**NOTES**

[1] From now on we will refer to it as *Letters*.
[2] The idea that 'language speaks being' is not a direct Aristotelian claim but a Heideggerian transformation of the classical tradition, particularly Aristotle's view of language as a system of signs representing thought and reality (*De Interpretatione*). Heidegger reconceives language as the site where being is disclosed, famously asserting that 'language is the house of being'. Ricoeur adopts and critically reworks this Heideggerian thesis in his own hermeneutic framework.
[3] According to Hurst (1996), Wollstonecraft agreed to undertake this expedition because she needed the money to become independent from Imlay. She is thus thought to have embarked on the journey with the idea of writing a popular book that would provide her with financial support. Hurst bases this view on Wollstonecraft's own Letter XIV. Here we follow Gordon's more recent account, which draws on letters discovered and published in 2005 as well as a broader range of secondary sources. This position coincides with Nyström's thesis, which remains the most widely accepted.
[4] Gordon (2016) recounts that, in her desperation, Mary even proposed to Imlay that they all live together —herself, Fanny, Imlay, and his new partner. The rejection of this proposal became a decisive moment that brought together a series of long-standing hardships: her mother's disdain, her father's alcoholism, the class prejudice and superficiality of her employers, the death of her closest friend Fanny Blood, the rejection by the artist Fuseli, the political failure of the French experiment, and the post-revolutionary Terror, among others.
[5] As Todd states 'she encoded much of the romance with Imlay into her final book, *Letters from Sweden*' (1998, 186), hinting that something was amiss romantically for the author. Perhaps one of the worst betrayals Godwin committed was to publish her private affairs posthumously, disregarding the fact that the text's contemporary interlocutors were in no position to read it hospitably—let alone in defense of independent women philosophers and writers.
[6] It is worth undertaking an analysis that links the personal to the collective in life writing, or autobiography, since the semantic surplus generated by the disjunction between the 'I' of the work and the 'I' of the author gestures toward the identity of a specific historical community.

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