Conclusion
Imagination, Futurity, and the Value of Things

> I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man has still to do to obtain of the earth all it could yield […] Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Whither was he to flee from universal famine? Do not smile; I really became distressed for these fellow creatures yet unborn.
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>
> I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come.
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> Futurity, what has thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness![1]

In each of these moments from her *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, Wollstonecraft addresses the future: whether her own or that of humankind; whether perceptible or hidden in veils of time; whether anticipating happiness or in a deep despair that makes her feel that 'death under every form, appears to me like something getting free'.[2] In the third epigraph, as often in the *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft uses the rhetorical device of apostrophe, described by Anahid Nersessian as constituting a specific 'relational bearing' which brings a 'sustained attention' to 'things it can't even see or can't expect to look back'; apostrophe looks 'to the world … as the thing it cannot explain and with which it can only partially communicate'.[3] One of the effects of this 'one-sided attention' is to enable lyric subjectivity to become indeterminate: to allow the solitary subject to speak beyond the historical present to address other, as yet unlived, temporal frames. Although, writing as she is in summer 1796, it is only one year since Wollstonecraft completed her last major work, in

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which she casts the 'philosophic eye' of the historian on the early events of the French Revolution, here her relationship with time, as well as with human community, is itself recast, as her very choice of genre and modes of speech indicate. Even the act of observing the cascade near Fredericstadt in Norway – an 'always varying, still the same, torrent' – opens out to the future, as, stimulated by the 'tumultuous emotions' which 'this sublime object excited', an 'equal activity' is produced in Wollstonecraft's mind and she stretches out her 'hand to eternity' to grasp 'at immortality', as though impelled by what, in the first of these letters, she describes as an 'imperious' and 'involuntary sympathy', whose 'attraction of adhesion' which makes her feel part of a 'mighty whole'.[4] The 'sublime' cascade which prompts this move thus denotes not simply the 'impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent' but the equally unceasing 'current of [her] thoughts'. If, in her first letter, Wollstonecraft reflects on the involuntary sympathies which bind her to others in the present, by the Fredericstadt cascade, the compulsion is directed 'to eternity', dissolving the temporal distance which would divide the Wollstonecraft of 1796 from, for instance, her readers today, just as the distinction between her thoughts and the 'dashing of the rebounding torrent' is also dissolved. If Wollstonecraft reaches towards the future here, how might we, her future readers, receive her? Sylvana Tomaselli has observed that Wollstonecraft is reinvented by each age for the needs and purposes of their own time.[5] What Wollstonecraft do we need for ours? How, more specifically, given the concerns of this book, might an understanding of Wollstonecraft's engagement with the political economy of her time inform the political and economic debates and challenges of our moment, and our future?

These are big questions, and ones which have many possible answers given that we live in an era of multiple global stresses and crises, on many fronts, including geopolitical, economic, and democratic.[6] Whilst, clearly, investigating such a breadth of concerns lies beyond the purview of this book, we might echo Wollstonecraft's willingness, whilst gazing into the cascade, to let her thoughts flow in a similarly unrestrained 'current', and reflect on the differences between the political economy of Wollstonecraft's day and the economics of our own time, and especially what such differences mean in terms of equipping us to think our futurity, as Wollstonecraft does. Tomaselli notes that eighteenth-century political economy was in part a 'science' of balancing the needs of the present with those of the future; it thus 'sought to speak about tomorrows, the long-term consequences of the endeavor to satisfy today's desires'.[7] Such an endeavour is arguably absent from today's economics in its orthodox forms, given that, as is widely

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recognised, our planet's future is imperilled by a climate catastrophe which is a direct consequence of our existing economic systems and paradigms, with their extractive logics of productivity and growth driven by fossil fuels: a 'futurity' in some sense recognised in Wollstonecraft's anticipation of how 'the future improvement of the world' might lead to a point where 'the earth could no longer support' its future inhabitants.[8] The limitations of mainstream economics in this context are evident for instance in Geoffrey West's observation that concepts such as energy, entropy, and metabolism, which are central to any understanding to the future of life on the planet, 'have not found their way into mainstream economics', even whilst, ironically, economics 'is almost entirely structured according to metaphors from nineteenth-century energy physics', and especially the 'static physics model of equilibrium'.[9]

How did we get here, from Wollstonecraft's time? How and why is the economic thinking of our day so different from the burgeoning political economy of hers? Tim Rogan's recent study of the moral critique of capitalism attempted by twentieth-century economic thinkers Karl Polyani, E. P. Thompson and R. H. Trelawny, *The Moral Economists*, offers one way of answering these questions. In particular, Rogan shows how Polyani's search for an alternative account of the 'human personality' from that of the 'economic man' at the centre of liberal individualism took him back to Smith, from where he traced the history of post-Smithian economic thought through to the early twentieth century. Polyani identified Smith as a 'moral economist of a kind', and proposed that a 'declension into economism began *after* the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*'.[10] The 'humanistic foundations' of political economy were thus eroded after Smith, starting with Malthus and Ricardo, as economic maxims beyond moral rules emerged.[11] The naturalistic turn (which modelled human nature as site of supposedly natural drives and behaviours) further extruded moral thought from economics, and the stage was set for nineteenth-century utilitarian reasoning, which eliminated 'every passion and motivation other than the appetite for pecuniary gain from the understanding of social life'.[12] By 1836, John Stuart Mill could define political economy as a science approaching persons 'solely as beings who desire to possess wealth', and as perfected by the 'entire abstraction of every other human passion or motive', although he also argued that its conclusions 'are only true conditionally'.[13] By the end of the nineteenth century, economics had 'adopted the metaphors and techniques of physics', in particular energy physics and the 'dominant metaphorical referent' of the engine.[14] If, in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, economists analysed the forces of 'equilibrium and

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disequilibrium in specific markets and industries', another set of models further intrenched economic rationalism in the mid-twentieth century, as modernist concepts of system, structure, and organisation took hold across the social sciences.[15] By the 1930s and 1940s, the concept of 'the economy', defined as the 'integrated system of exchange of a specific nation', became the object of economics as a modern social science, and GDP was invented, a measure still at the heart of national economic policy despite the metric's failure to measure quality of life or societal well-being.[16]

This brief history helps to explain what economics is today, as a discipline and knowledge practice, as well as what it is not. As Joanna Rostek has described, economics is a social science which models market behaviour; it is suspicious of embedded values of individuals or social groups; it encourages its students to distinguish what is 'positivist and rationalist' from individual, subjective, or social value.[17] Moral questions tend to be sidelined, whilst 'economic' ones are foregrounded; economics thus obscures its own values by presenting them as value-neutral. Thus, as Julie Nelson suggests, '[m]orality is left to the humanists, while mainstream economists pursue "objective" study based on an assumed analogy between economic "laws" … and the "laws" of physical science'. As Mariana Mazzucato comments, economics measures 'the price of everything and the value of nothing'.[18] Such omissions lay the discipline open to critique, motivated precisely by the values and perspectives it excludes, and such critiques abound.[19] In Nitasha Kaul's words, '[i]t is instructive to note what is the outside of neoclassical stories about the economy: women, nonmarketable ideas/objects, the environment, history, emotions, nonreductive, nonformalizable, nonmeasurable elements of comprehension'.[20] Also excluded is any sense of its own history as a discipline, as Iain Hampsher-Monk has noted.[21] To reform, then, economics arguably needs to look outside itself. In his call for economists to learn 'lessons from Romanticism', Richard Bronk argues that 'successful explanations of the behaviour of economic agents … need to take as much account of the roles played by imagination and sentiment as of those played by deductive reasoning and optimisation calculations'; he argues too that economics' commitment to a single 'holistic explanatory system or set of synthetic models' needs to be modified by the realisation that 'only fragmentary insight is ultimately possible'.[22] Nicholas Maxwell's contrasting of 'wisdom-inquiry' from 'knowledge-inquiry' is instructive here: whereas the latter 'demands that emotions, desires, values, human ideals and aspirations, philosophies of life be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry, wisdom-inquiry requires that they be included'.[23]

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In terms of what is central to economics, and what is excluded from it, Mazzucato's observation, that many women scholars 'have put life at the centre of the economy, not the economy at the centre of life', is instructive.[24] Her citing of Hannah Arendt on the public life, *vita active*; Elinor Ostrom on community creation via the commons; Kate Raworth's circular economy; and others on transformative finance, value creation, and green transition shows how some female economists have urged the primacy of human life and worked for an economics which serves humanity, rather than the other way around.[25] From the point of view of where Wollstonecraft started from, as this book has shown, we have in some ways come full circle, in the attempt to return what Rogan terms a 'displaced humanism' to economic thinking.[26] Given what this book has demonstrated, such figures should be seen as having an important predecessor in Wollstonecraft, situated as she was just at the hinge point before the bedding down of certain economic attitudes and orthodoxies – later to be described as 'economism' – which she battled to hold off, and against which she sought to defend alternative values, and alternative ways of thinking and writing.[27]

I want to use the figure of 'displaced humanism' to return to Wollstonecraft's *Short Residence*, to inquire further into what might be enabled or performed by the imagination from which Bronk suggests today's economics has much to learn. Displaced humanism, or humanity, is a good description of the thematic concerns of this deeply fraught text, written on what for Wollstonecraft were the geographical margins of the 'improved' civilisation of late Enlightenment Europe, whose ideals, in any case, were fracturing as the events of the French Revolution unfolded. Dislocated as she is from her home country, from the heart of Europe, from her collapsing relationship with Imlay, and perhaps too from the political beliefs which sustained – just – the hard-won optimism of the *Historical and Moral Review of the French Revolution*, of all Wollstonecraft's texts, this is where displacement, on all these levels, is explored most fully. Displacement as both mood and ontological experience is evident in Wollstonecraft's sense of disconnection from human community, from a 'world' which 'has disgusted me' and 'friends' who 'have proved unkind'; and she confesses that she has often 'considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind'.[28] Elsewhere, it appears to her that 'death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free – to expand in I know not what element'; she is only diverted from this most extreme form of displacement, into death, by the presence of the cascade or 'cataract', which, as we saw above, enables her to reach out in thought

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'to eternity'.[29] Caught between death and futurity, for Wollstonecraft, it is only imaginative freedom of thought that enables the burdens of existence to be tolerated: only imagination, in some form, which can mediate and make liveable otherwise unendurable states of displacement.

A little earlier in the text, another imaginative reaching forward through the currents of time occurs as Wollstonecraft voyages along Norway's 'wild coast':

> I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man has still to do to obtain of the earth all it could yield. I even carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two of years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot – yes, these bleak shores. Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Whither was he to flee from universal famine? Do not smile; I really became distressed for these fellow creatures yet unborn.[30]

Here is an alternative form of displacement than the alienation from the 'grand mass of mankind' discussed above: not the unwilled fragmentation of the individual from the social whole, but its opposite, imaginatively mediated transport from a specifically inhabited time and place to affective communion with an absent, 'yet unborn' human community. This imaginative transcendence of the self unfolds various prospects of 'futurity', of land in states both of 'improvement' and exhaustion; and it enables forms of fellow-feeling with 'these fellow creatures yet unborn'. In Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*, our capacity to experience sympathy with the dead illustrates how fellow-feeling even operates in limit cases, beyond the line dividing the living from the dead.[31] Relatedly, Judith Butler has observed how grievability, 'attributed to living creatures', marks 'their value'.[32] Wollstonecraft's projective sympathy with the starving future inhabitants of the earth inverts the temporal direction of Smith's test case, from those no longer alive to those yet to live, and does so to assert community with them; to assert, in Butler's terms, their grievability and hence their worth. Evident in the scene is how the imagination is a power of transgression beyond limits of time, place, and subjective life – 'the imagination went still farther'; it is also a power of cohesion, marked by the affective response of 'distress' through which the bonds of the human community are felt even across temporal distance, and even (given that it is the imagination which enables all this) in the absence of rational knowledge.

The sympathetic imagination pictures what is yet to come; it secures the affective bonds in which human community coheres, and by which it

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values, even beyond the bounds of time and place. Imagination, the figure or movement of displacement, of going out of oneself, mediates the experience which defines 'humanity': fellow-feeling with those beyond oneself. Defined both as a capacity for fellow-feeling, and as the name for our species, humanity is unthinkable without the self-displacement of the sympathetic imagination: to be human involves the capacity to be displaced from the self, as manifested through feeling, distress, or otherwise. That same movement of self-dispossession enables the act of valuing evident in grief: as Butler states, grief shows how we are 'implicated in lives that are not our own', a 'sphere of dispossession' which exposes our 'primary sociality', and which is 'fundamental' to who we are.[33] Such moves recall the 'negative epistemology' of the ethics required to underwrite environmental policy today, which must address 'future persons' not 'our present self-interest', hypothetical beings, not actual ones, the 'form of a life' rather than 'some specific living thing'.[34] If, as John Whale says, Wollstonecraft argues for a 'moral version' of political economy, here is an ethics which does more than oppose the self-interest on which political economy is founded, but which can go 'still farther' to anticipate not simply the lives of others, but their possible futures too.[35] For Smith, political economy's central concern is provisioning the populace (its first object is to provide 'a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves').[36] Wollstonecraft's imaginative move here shows how political economy's account of 'improvements' is bounded by the limits of existing planetary resources. Extending 'future improvements' to their limit point, Wollstonecraft thinks a future beyond political economy's bounds, and reveals its incapacity to do so too. By the same token, if political economy's purpose is to provision the people, what Wollstonecraft views here is its endpoint: both where it is heading and where it will fail.

For some critics, the repeated staging of scenes of imaginative transport in *Short Residence* suggests a reading of the text in the context of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, for instance, as a critique of 'disinterested contemplation'.[37] But explicit geopolitical and ecological concerns present in Wollstonecraft's contemplation of the 'future improvement of the world' suggest that the imagination might equally be understood as the instrument of, or capacity for, a more than aesthetic experience: it points to the operation of what might be termed an economic or environmental imagination, one as 'proleptically ecological' as, for Jonathan Kramnick, eighteenth-century locodescriptive writing is.[38] For imaginatively at stake here is not just community with future inhabitants of earth, but relations

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with the planet itself, its land, and finite resources, traced through 'improvement' (or extractive exploitation) to 'perfect cultivation' and beyond, to the exhaustion of planetary resources. If fellow-feeling with others enacts the shared bond of membership in human community, there is a third party in that relationship, the planet itself: a relationship recognised in today's environmentalist thought as the fundamental ethic of humans' co-community with land.[39] Ecofeminist readings of *Short Residence*, by attending to those moments in the text where Wollstonecraft finds imaginative communion with spring water, or the sea, or jellyfish, thus see them as dissolving a problematic dualism of mankind versus nature, and enacting an alternative imaginative and reciprocal relation with the materiality of the world through an ecological consciousness.[40] If the imagination is an 'adhesive' force in such instances, it shows the cleaving of the human not only to the 'mass of mankind' but to that too of the material natural world; it suggests the centrality of imagination in thinking through that relation in all its implications, including in both 'improved' and catastrophic versions of futurity. If, as noted earlier, the exclusion from 'mainstream economics' of concepts such as energy, entropy, and metabolism which are central to any understanding of the future of life on the planet means that economics cannot plot a future beyond the depletion of energy and other resources, such absences do not constrain Wollstonecraft's imagination.[41] Wollstonecraft's proleptic imagination, indeed, has multiple imaginative capacities – to reach out 'to eternity'; to bind itself in affective community with the material world; to mediate the affective bonds through which we value – which might usefully supplement and reinvigorate the narrowly focused economic thought of today.

Imagination can free us, then, in this reading, into new modes of thinking in which our futurity might be grasped. But imagination can also constrain and imprison: a situation to which, for Wollstonecraft, writing, in all its resources, must be applied. In particular for Wollstonecraft, imagination has been captured, even corrupted, by commercial society; as the Whig theorists of Lady Credit realised, far from being excluded from the realm of economic activity, imagination is in fact at its heart. Commerce, Wollstonecraft observes in *Short Residence*, 'wears out the most scared principles of humanity and rectitude', and the seductions of imagination are central to such erosion.[42] In her 'Letter on the Character of the French Nation', the imagination is a 'wanton' who, 'with her artful coquetry, lures us forward, and makes us run over a rough road, pushing aside every obstacle merely to catch a disappointment'. Here is the same deception of human nature into desire for wealth, consumer conveniences, and comfort

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which Smith sketched in his tale of the poor man's son. As Wollstonecraft tells the tale, it is the sterner reason which must be recovered, for 'the wants of reason are very few, and, were we to consider dispassionately the real value of most things, we should probably rest satisfied with simple gratification of our physical necessities, and be content with negative goodness'.[43] Arriving at such dispassionate realisation of 'real value', however, is precisely the problem, given the capturing of reason by the feminine allurements of imagination. In *Short Residence*, the drama of reason's struggle against imagination is recast in the 'noble forests' and 'wild coasts' of Norway, where imagination's capacity to reach forward into the future enables it to take different forms. If the 'wanton imagination' of commercial society is devoted to self-interest, advancement, and pleasure, displaced from such objects, the imagination operates differently, able to consider, in its meditations of humanity's future, or its relation with the material world, the 'real value of most things'. Such contemplation suggests ways a 'displaced humanism' might return to economic thought, through a movement which involves fellow-feeling with others: precisely the opposite of the self-interest enshrined at the heart of orthodox economisms, and exactly the 'elementary solidarities' between individuals which, in Rogan's account, twentieth-century moral economists sought to mobilise against capitalism's atomised conception of the individual.[44] Although not named in Kaul's list, quoted above, of what is excluded from contemporary economics, the imaginative, alongside the affective, the feminine, and the social, sits outside the rational world of economics or the construction of economic man driven by self-interest. Wollstonecraft shows both how the imagination is at the heart of economic desire and action, and how, in a reformed operation, it might enable us to consider the 'real value of most things'. If, as Tomaselli has commented, the problems of commercial society ultimately required 'a new order of self-understanding', the imagination, so central to the mechanisms and drives of commercial society, must surely be central to such self-revisioning.[45]

Wollstonecraft returns to the question of value at the end of her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, a text written shortly after the 'Letter on the Character of the French Nation' and which continues many of its themes, as well as addressing the role of writing in bringing about reform. Reviewing the factors which both enabled and hindered the growth of political knowledge, she notes how in France it 'had long been the fashion to talk of liberty, and to dispute on hypothetical and logical points of political economy'. Whilst 'gleams of truth' were thus disseminated, 'demagogues' flourished at a time of 'taste for sheer declamation',

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and the French language itself, through the 'pomp of diction' and 'oratorial flourishes', enabled the production of a 'singular fund of superficial knowledge, caught in the tumult of pleasure from the shallow stream of conversation'.[46] By contrast, she observes how the emergence of new forms of 'original composition' in Germany, replacing 'laborious erudition' which merely elucidated 'ancient writers', enabled the estimation of 'the value of things'.[47] Superficial, fashionable speech contrasts with original writing which articulates value: a privileging of writing's potential to reveal, reform, renew, and rouse, which is repeated in her last published work, the essay 'On Poetry' of April 1797. Such compositions, perhaps, show how a 'political system more simple' than those of existing governments would 'check' their 'follies', as she speculates in the *View*'s final page.[48] Sweeping though her remarks are, it is clear what is at stake for Wollstonecraft in the work of late Enlightenment print culture, including in her own decade-long career: the capacity to distinguish what is of 'value' from what is not, to contribute to the pulling down of the old, and the construction of the improved. Her distinction between French and German knowledge cultures turns precisely on their respective capacities to contribute to such ends, and her own repeated turn to the generically varied tools of contemporary print culture signals her own deep interest in the role of writing less as a means to systematise her beliefs into abstractions and principles and more for its communicative power and potential effects. An attempt to organise her writing into systematic principles and positions is thus fundamentally at odds with what her writing is, how it works, what it seeks to do. Something of this is perhaps suggested by Wollstonecraft's unrooted, displaced, mobile location throughout the *Short Residence*: she is a wanderer, a traveller on rough seas, navigating dangerously around rocks hidden beneath the surface. It is in precisely such moments of precarity, jeopardy, and isolation that she finds her voice, and the power of that voice stems from its ability to speak despite and across such contexts.

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