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## Sensibility

The reputation of the eighteenth-century literature of Sensibility<sup>1</sup> has never quite recovered from its embarrassing association with displays of unmeasured, extravagant emotion. It was ‘excessive’. This was not simply distaste for a fading fashion; these are the terms in which it was criticized by some of its major practitioners, and they offer a key to this highly formulaic, but inherently unstable, kind of writing. Consider three scenes. In the first, a father enters with his dead daughter in his arms:

Howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones:  
Had I your tongue and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives. . . .  
I might have sav'd her; now she's gone for ever!  
Cordelia, Cordelia! Stay a little. Ha!  
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,  
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.<sup>2</sup>

In the second, a father confronts his disowned daughter, who has fallen from virtue:

His daughter was now prostrate at his feet. ‘Strike,’ said she, ‘strike here a wretch, whose misery cannot end but with that death she deserves.’ Her hair had fallen on her shoulders! her look had the horrid calmness of outbreathed despair! Her father would have spoken; his lip quivered, his cheek grew pale! his eyes lost the lightening of their fury! there was a reproach in them, but with a mingling of pity! He turned them up to heaven – then on his daughter. – He laid his left hand on his heart – the sword dropped from his right – he burst into tears.

. . . ‘Speak,’ said he, addressing himself to his daughter; speak, I will hear thee.’ – The desperation that supported her was lost; she fell to the ground, and bathed his feet with her tears!<sup>3</sup>

The third evokes the death of another young girl through the responses of her closest companion:

The old man held one languid arm in his, and had the small hand tight folded to his breast, for warmth. It was the hand she had stretched out to him with her last smile – the hand that had led him on, through all their wanderings. Ever and anon he pressed it to his lips; then hugged it to his breast again, murmuring that it was warmer now; and, as he said it, he looked, in agony, to those who stood around . . .

‘It is not,’ said the schoolmaster, as he . . . gave his tears free vent, ‘it is not on earth that Heaven’s justice ends. Think what earth is, compared, with the World to which her young spirit has winged its early flight . . .’<sup>4</sup>

In all three, maximum emotional capital is generated from extreme suffering. Spectators and readers are called to witness exclamation becoming declamation, grief modulating to self-pity, stoicism to emotional abandon. All are scenes in which the suffering dyad is observed by another who stands in the narrative for the audience, and through whose responses the unbearable expression of emotion is mediated. Only the second of these passages, from Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), is usually associated with ‘Sensibility’, and it is so because feeling is represented as exceeding the capacity of language to express it, and is superseded by gesture. Lear’s speech brings tragic recognition and unmitigated pathos into overwhelming dramatic immediacy; despite the presence of Kent on stage, a modern audience is not shielded from its impact in production (though, ironically, a bowdlerized ending prevented eighteenth-century theatre-goers from experiencing it). In the death-scene of Little Nell from Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), Sensibility – to later readers at least – has unmistakably modulated into sentimental moralizing; Oscar Wilde famously quipped, ‘One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.’<sup>5</sup>

Literary history has placed Sensibility as a transitional phase of mid eighteenth-century writing, between the decline of neo-classical ‘Reason’ and the eruption of Romantic ‘Imagination’. It identifies characteristic features including anti-rationalism, a focus on emotional response and somatized reactions (tears, swoons, deathly pallor), a prevailing mood of melancholy, fragmentation of form, and set-piece scenes of virtue in distress. But all these features, in isolation or in combination, occur not only in Shakespeare and Dickens, but also in works by representative neo-classical and Romantic writers. The heroine of Alexander Pope’s Ovidian epistle ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ (1717), for example, whose fictional afterlife in the literature of Sensibility

was substantial, was not being wholly satirized when she uttered her body's expressions of abandonment:

Still rebel nature holds out half my heart  
 Nor prayers nor fasts its stubborn pulse restrain,  
 Nor tears for ages taught to flow in vain. . . .  
 Oh name for ever sad, for ever dear,  
 Still breathed in sighs, still ushered with a tear . . .  
 Line after line my gushing eyes o-erflow,  
 Led through a sad variety of woe.<sup>6</sup>

Similar embodied distress is evoked in Coleridge's 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson' (1802):

Methinks to weep with you  
 Were better far than to rejoice alone –  
 But that my coarse domestic life has known  
 No Habits of self-nursing Sympathy . . .<sup>7</sup>

Both of these employ the discursive counters that characterize the 'moment of Sensibility'; neither can be accommodated within its normal literary-historical parameters. Richardson was certainly employing many of its features in the 1740s; Dickens relied on their persistent emotional appeal to readers well into the 1840s. Any definition by itemized characteristics is a fiction of taxonomy, and the broader time-frame of this volume allows us to take a catholic view of Sensibility, as a system of relations and ruptures, part of a fluctuating but continuous repertoire in emotional representation.

As identity posited on itemized characteristics is a fiction, so (David Hume pointed out in 1740) is the notion of a continuum: both are ways of making sense of the otherwise fearfully random appearance of phenomena to perception. In the face of uncertainty, as Hume's own highly sceptical analysis made plain, attentive analysis succumbs to the desire for narrative, and the untidy or disturbing elements of literary texts tend to be subsumed within the neater explanations of History. Certainly, any story of Sensibility must start by recognizing its affinities with other contemporary impulses, literary, cultural, and ideological. Because Sensibility, as Julie Ellison has put it, was 'a transaction, not a character type' or a checklist of features, it could be enlisted to a range of eighteenth-century debates from (as I shall suggest) patriotism to personal conduct, slave ownership to sexual morality.<sup>8</sup>

The eighteenth-century study of sensibility was part of what Mackenzie described as 'the science of manners'.<sup>9</sup> As a literary mode it embodied an experimental approach to character based on Hume's acceptance of the ubiquity of the passions as motivators to action: 'Morality . . . is more properly

felt than judg'd of; sympathy is 'the chief source of moral distinctions'.<sup>10</sup> Where Descartes had reasoned on the basis of analytic separation of mind and body, Scottish Enlightenment writers attempting to realize a comprehensive 'Science of Man' realigned the moral and physical selves. Drawing on a well-established eighteenth-century tradition of psycho-physiological thinking in Anglo-Scottish thought, Alexander Munro located sensibility in the physiological organization of the nervous system; his *Structure and Function of the Nervous System* (1783) analysed the position and function of the 'great sympathetic nerve' running through the spinal column, connecting and transmitting messages from all over the body. The embodiment of sensibility in masculine or feminine persons, its precise somatic location and expression, and the possibility that class and ethical distinction were physically manifest (in for, example, a highly 'refined' nervous organization), were all matters of inquiry that connect Freud's nineteenth-century re-conceptualizing of hysteria with Lear's '*hysterica passio*' (II.iv.55), the smothering, choking sensation occasioned by rising of the womb into the throat. Nerves were compared to musical strings vibrating in company, an analogy elaborated by James Beattie in *An Essay on Poetry and Music* (1776). In 1759, Alexander Gerard articulated an orthodox, and powerful, compound of ethical and aesthetic value: 'In order to form a fine taste, the mental powers which compose it must possess exquisite *sensibility* and delicacy.'<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth's 'sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart', and Keats's 'true voice of feeling', the only proof of 'axioms in philosophy' being registered 'upon our pulses', are closely aligned with this psycho-physiological theory.<sup>12</sup>

Sensibility also functioned as a kind of social cement that holds individuals together in a moralized and emotionalized public sphere, through a 'language [of] the heart' that 'strengthens the bond of society, and attracts individuals from their private system to exert themselves in acts of generosity and benevolence'.<sup>13</sup> Both the ethical theory of sympathy and the literature which tested, elaborated and complicated it depended on propriety. Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) described it as the regulatory impulse that underpinned personal security, protection of property, and pleasure in self-reflection and sympathetic relationships. If the passions motivated human behaviour, propriety directed otherwise wayward and subjective impulses into social channels and protected the stability of societies through time. The assumption that humanity was naturally social, and could best be studied through observation of relationships, was fundamental to the 'Science of Man'. The study of sociability was therefore the basis of Sensibility. The Man of Feeling was a product and an index of 'Civil Society'. He belonged, according to Scottish theory, to a particular phase within a universal model of societal progression, a 'moment' in which a society's economic surplus

over subsistence need enabled humanity to cultivate the luxury of emotional expression in relationships. The principle of ‘conjectural history’, as it came to be called, was that all societies pass through similar stages from barbarism to the civil polity, and that the study of societies of other places and other times provided access to understanding of the history and current state of the British present.

Another Scottish Enlightenment writer, the historian William Robertson, experimented with character-depiction as the agent and focal point of historical change, and by the turn of the nineteenth century novelists were writing the *éducation sentimentale* of their eponymous heroes as ‘personified history’. In his Preface to *Fleetwood; or, the New Man of Feeling* (1805), William Godwin insisted that the protagonist’s reactions were to be understood in relation to ‘such adventures as for the most part have occurred to at least one half of the Englishmen now existing, who are of the same rank of life’.<sup>14</sup> Of overwhelming importance for the subsequent history of the novel was Scott’s *Waverley, or ’Tis Sixty Years Since*, also begun in 1805 and published in 1814. These were exemplary ‘natural histories’ of sentiment, stories of the formation of individual belief systems, on an analogy with the study of the history of ‘Civil Society’ which was one of the great achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment. *Waverley* embarks on a sentimental journey from his English home to Lowland Scotland and thence to the furthest fastnesses of the Highlands; his geographical progress corresponds to a journey back in time, in which he encounters pastoral, and then martial, hunter-gathering societies at earlier stages of development than those he has left behind at *Waverley-Honour*. He also confronts political realities and the real personal consequences of emotional indulgence. In the course of this journey, *Waverley* is educated out of his naive understanding (the product of a diet of chivalric romances and sentimental novels) of Sensibility as free expression of the feelings into a mature ethical understanding that the emotional basis of action must include prudential reflection on the passionate impulses of the moment. Sympathies initiate moral response; judgement directs it. His progress from passions to prudence stands both as an embodiment of Smithian theory and as an accelerated synecdoche of the history of Britain since the Union of Parliaments in 1707. Scott’s later novel *Rob Roy* traced its hero’s sentimental education in relation to the world of commercial exchange, as Frank Osbaldistone’s trajectory from resistance to participation is interleaved with his physical journey northwards from the Civil Society of London to the feudal barbarity of the Highlands. In both cases, individual progress towards integration takes place against a backdrop of public rebellion (the Jacobite risings of 1745 and 1715); the price of compliance in the public sphere is unrecuperable loss of intense emotional ties.

*Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is strikingly similar in its pedagogical assumptions. Austen's Elinor Dashwood is a better Smithian than many professional philosophers or economists, and certainly than most exponents of sensibility in fiction. She understands that truly *moral* sentiments involve strenuous stoicism as much as a spontaneous expression of feelings. The novel plays out the implications of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: as a condition where emotions exceed words, Sensibility does not belong only to Marianne's sobs, screams and precipitate exits from the drawing room; the inarticulate Edward Ferrars is as much a victim of his feelings as the irrepressibly vocal heroine. In both cases, somatized spectacle supplants language: Marianne's eyes 'expressed the astonishment, which her lips could not utter'; Edward, with a 'complexion white with agitation . . . stammered out an unintelligible reply', the violence of his feelings conveyed by his absent-mindedly spoiling both a pair of scissors and their sheath 'by cutting the latter to pieces' with the former.<sup>15</sup> *She* is disabled as a moral agent by her feelings – 'without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself' (p. 71); *he* causes confusion and pain through his inability to be sufficiently aware of his own feelings and their effects on Elinor. Smith's *Theory* contained insecurities that were exactly suited to the kinds of inquiry explored in Austen's fiction: the enabler of sociability, sensibility often seemed to lead instead to incapacity to participate effectively in society. Strong private emotions did not readily accommodate to what Hannah More described in *Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle* (1782) as 'the social sympathy, the sense humane'.<sup>16</sup>

The 'history of ideas' approach to understanding the novel of Sensibility works best in relation to fictional 'histories of sentiment' like Scott's or Austen's. Its implicit ranking of forms of knowledge (philosophy placed 'above' and anterior to fiction) is problematic, however, as are its inherent gendering and power relations ('ideas' are public, masculine, inaugural; novels are private, feminine, responsive and secondary). There is, too, a more general question about the transferability of knowledge from one genre to another: a moral sentiment as described in a philosophical treatise becomes something quite different when embodied in character, plot and transmitted through the commercial transactions of publication. Having registered this, it seems important not simply to substitute another master-narrative – of cultural politics, gender definition or emancipation – for that of intellectual history. Here again it may be helpful to think of Sensibility as transactional rather than elemental in character, belonging to many stories. But common to them all is a formal investigation into the viability of narrative itself, in relation to the expression of emotion.

The represented 'scene' of sympathetic engagement is characteristically followed either by the protagonist's recollection in tranquillity or by a

narrator's or observer's connected account: the 'history', in other words, of the moment. Both *Waverley* and Elinor Dashwood are represented as experiencing moments of overwhelming feeling, which can nonetheless be subsumed in the narrative of sociability. But the immediacy of emotional connection (it was typically described in a lexicon of 'wounds', piercings, and transfixings) troubled connected exposition. Sensibility was experienced, observed, and lost again in the moment of contact; in this sense it had and could have no 'history'. If Sensibility as a narrative mode was a product of the evolutionary and progressive assumptions of the eighteenth-century 'Science of Man', it also challenged them. Typically invested in 'scenes' rather than continuous stories, its narrative signature was (both structurally and syntactically) disjunctive, fragmentary.<sup>17</sup> The fictional experience was simultaneously a connecting and a disconnected one. It brought readers (or spectators) and protagonists together in a community of feeling, but in separated episodes authenticated, as the contemporary commentator Vicesimus Knox noted, by that which 'cannot be pointed out by verbal description, and which can only be perceived by the vibrations it produces on the nervous system'.<sup>18</sup> Its symptomatic physical experience also tended, as Ann Yearsley's 'To Indifference' intoned, to be opposed to abstract thought:

IDEA, smother'd, leaves my mind a waste,  
Where SENSIBILITY must lose her prey.<sup>19</sup>

In Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* (1777), the heroine's 'very thoughts are not accurate representations of what [she] feel[s]'; she senses 'something busy about my heart which I cannot reduce into thinking'.<sup>20</sup> Her epistolary description of this failure is subsequently enacted in the text, as the conventions of correspondence give way to the broken exclamations of melodrama which link it with the 'unspeakable' horror at the heart of Romantic dramas such as Shelley's *The Cenci* (1819) or Byron's *Manfred* (1817).

The pervasive success of the literature of Sensibility can only be understood through its slippery relation to the declared pedagogical function of literature in the eighteenth century. Fiction's capacity to deliver instructive visions of virtue rewarded and vice confounded was repeatedly adduced to justify its questionable tendency to represent (in the language of Swift's rational animals the Houyhnhnms) 'the thing which was not'.<sup>21</sup> Educating the passions rather than inflaming them, displaying the 'proper' degree of sensibility, in conjunction with virtue, was the function of the fictional 'impartial spectator' in Smith's *Moral Sentiments*, who sympathized with passionate encounters without succumbing to them.<sup>22</sup> But expressed intention is not the same thing as effect; readerly satisfaction related treacherously to didactic fables, and only tangentially to aesthetic quality. It was evident to commentators,

practitioners and consumers alike, that while the theory of the literature of Sensibility was about instruction, the practice – what kept people actually *reading* it – had more to do with pleasure. As Mackenzie himself pointed out, ‘it cannot always be said that [such novels] are equally calculated to improve as to delight’ (*Works*, v: 179). The non-improving pleasures of sympathy, those aspects of response that could not be described as edifying, were sanitized in proportion as they were perceived to be dangerous.

Hume’s *Treatise* had re-expressed sympathy and sensibility as principles of connection (p. 228). A character in *Fleetwood* accounts for his patriotism on the grounds that ‘the human mind irresistibly wishes to connect itself with something’ (p. 197); Sensibility was enlisted in historiography in interesting, and conflicting, ways, as historians reconstructed affecting national stories of heroines like Mary Queen of Scots (the subject of a series of passionate Romantic dramas of Sensibility), and encouraged affective investment in relics from the past. The pleasures of Sensibility were linked to perception intensified in momentary sensation: iterative and indefinitely renewable, but not able to be subsumed within larger explanatory paradigms of connected narrative. Sensibility simultaneously subscribed to and resisted philosophical history, embodying in its characteristic forms loss and melancholy as the inevitable price of progress in the world of Civil Society. It exulted in the particularity of sympathy in local and particular relations, extolling connection, and embodying its rupture. Antiquarian collections, like fictions of Sensibility, were committed to a public narrative of connection, but their actual attraction lay more in sequence without development, private pleasures rather than public utility. The objects of family history promised connection with the past, but their contemplation invoked a sense of loss rather than progress; the activity was denigrated by its association with excess and solipsistic or miserly pleasures, and the figure of the antiquary gloating over his collection was familiar in caricature. Sensibility featured heroes who had been rendered morbidly misanthropic through excessive emotional investment, and who drew generic characteristics from the ‘humourists’ of Renaissance writing: Smollett’s Matthew Bramble in *Humphry Clinker* (1771), for example, or – more analytically – Godwin’s Fleetwood. The virtue of such figures was measured by their abhorrence of ‘the society of man in general’ (*Fleetwood*, p. 59); they were impotent benevolists. *Fleetwood* makes clear that a career in business offers unique opportunity for ‘extensive . . . power of relieving distress, of exciting industry, of developing talents’ and ‘supplying means of improvement’ – all of which are denied to men in retirement (p. 194). From the 1770s the hero or heroine of Sensibility delighted in ‘Nature’ rather than in cities or in company. Apart, that is, from the yearning desire for perfect, untroubled sympathetic communication with a single



soul-mate. In ironic acknowledgement of the vicissitudes of human interaction, the ‘affectionate friend’ (*Fleetwood*, p. 68) in the literature and art of Sensibility was commonly a dog.

An inherently theatrical literary mode, Sensibility was rhapsodic both in its tendency to disconnect utterance from logical sequence, and in its essentially ecstatic organization. Feeling is in excess of the needs of narrative in representation, and therefore tends to subvert its explicatory power. Even Richardson’s story of *Clarissa*, as Samuel Johnson put it, was ‘only giving occasion to the sentiment’.<sup>23</sup> The literature of Sensibility was characteristically self-referential; its fictional plots embroiled in meta-fictional discussions about both the conditions of virtue and of storytelling. The fragments of *The Man of Feeling* presuppose a once-connected, now ruined narrative savaged by the violent shredding which transforms it to fodder for a curate’s gun. It is an image of the untranslatability of emotion from the language of the heart to the language of the page. Fragments are survivors of a failed story: ‘turbulent passions,’ wrote Lord Kames, ‘require an expression both rough and broken’ (*Elements*, I: 211). This mutilation is a feature of utterance imagined as solitary and dissociated, which at first sight sits oddly with Sensibility’s standing as a social connective. The emotional authenticity so crucial to the ethos was most effectively demonstrated by corruption of narrative, and of expression. If the politics of style invoked the socially coercive ethic of Sensibility, it also indexed ‘true’ self-expression. In form and structure, then, the *literature* of Sensibility tended to challenge measure and propriety, and (at least implicitly) teleological narratives of progress. The fragmentary form of novels like *The Man of Feeling* and ‘epic’ like the rediscovered ‘Ossianic’ verse emphasized the failure (or perhaps refusal) of sympathy to connect, develop, or progress; its basic organizational mode was taxonomic rather than analytic. Representing the insufficiencies of language in words, the fiction of sensibility supplemented storytelling by graphic elements such as Sterne’s celebrated black and blank pages, and Mackenzie’s asterisks, dashes, liberal use of exclamation marks, signs of mutilation and fragmentation which drew attention to the illusory nature of connected narration. This is, in Jerome McGann’s words, performative rather than constative writing.<sup>24</sup> *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) breaks off with a bookish joke that creates a classic double-entendre: ‘So that when I stretch’d out my hand, I caught hold of the Fille de Chambre’s / END OF VOL. II.’<sup>25</sup>

Genre always exerts pressure on theory; ‘Moral Sense’ was distorted into excess by its embodiment in character and scene. The appropriateness of a theatrical vocabulary of ‘scene’ and ‘representation’ highlights an affinity that would hasten Sensibility’s subsequent devaluation in the hierarchy of literary-historical modes. Its readily parodied rhapsodic style adheres to

an expressionist aesthetic which defies measure (whether in the shape of stoic restraint, or of poetic metre) and explanation. Where History's generic affiliations were with tragedy, the disjointed 'frame by frame' representation in performance and substitution of bodily gesture and expression for verbal articulacy that guaranteed the authenticity of 'true feeling' associated Sensibility with melodrama, which specializes (as Peter Brooks has put it) in 'visual summary of the emotional situation'.<sup>26</sup> It is helpful, in fact, to regard Sensibility as the repressed face of melodrama; where the latter unbridles expression, the former strangulates it to intensify emotional effect. While the ethical standing of Sensibility might be defended by emphasizing its didactic and pedagogical orientation – the education of the passions was its 'business' – its actual impact inclined towards emotion that exceeded utility. The heroine of melodrama is a victim who must suffer but cannot learn. Her pain is expression without sublimation for either character or audience; emotional analysis is performed as gestural sequence. Nor is it contained – as Pope's *Eloisa's* self-dramatizing outbursts assuredly are – in the wit of form, where the conventions of the Ovidian epistle allowed latitude for direct expression of a heroine's most abandoned feelings in tightly controlled heroic couplets. Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* was, according to Walter Scott, moved by 'the excess and over-indulgence of passions and feelings, in themselves blameless, nay praiseworthy, but which, indulged to morbid excess, and coming into fatal though fortuitous concurrence with each other, lead to a most disastrous consequence'.<sup>27</sup> Scott aligned Mackenzie's intentions with 'actual life'; but the resulting fiction transformed the psychological revelations of its epistolary conventions to melodrama: hero and heroine were represented in increasingly stagey terms which referred itself to readers' familiarity with extremes of Shakespearian tragic expression and put the scene of suffering at the centre of the novel. The extravagant jealousy of Othello, interpreted as the overwhelming of social sympathies by immoderate passion, was reworked in a number of fictions of Sensibility, including *Julia* and *Fleetwood*.

In American writing of the post-Revolutionary period Sensibility metamorphosed perhaps even more readily into melodrama, as established ethical and narrative models were exposed to new social conditions. At the first test of her virtue – a test she is destined to fail without effective struggle – the heroine of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791; 1794) seals her own fate by the excess of her response: 'it is not too late to recede from the brink of a precipice, from which I can only behold the dark abyss of ruin, shame, and remorse!'<sup>28</sup> Simply to articulate her dilemma in this way is to slide into the rhetorical world of excess in which her ruin is guaranteed. So the 'unguarded step' of Rousseau's *Julie* spells – in her eyes – irrevocable ruin:

'I have fallen into the abyss of shame from which a girl never returns.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in the ambivalent first-person narrative of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), Clara comes within one step of the 'abyss', 'hurrying to the verge of the same gulf', drawn into a nightmare world of murderous excess by the misleading evidence of her senses.<sup>30</sup> This 'single step' – elsewhere, in this highly formulaic mode, a 'precipice' (*Fleetwood*, p. 61) – is interesting. It is the step that must (the ethical imperative) be resisted, but cannot be. The narrative imperative is that it be taken: without Charlotte's 'fall', there will be no exemplary tale for the reader to sympathize with and the narrator to moralize over. It is also the fulcrum on which sensibility tips irrevocably over into excess and melodrama. The didactic (narrative, third person) and the expressive (emotive, first person) impulses of sensibility are fundamentally at odds.

The potentially voyeuristic and self-gratifying implications of the literature of Sensibility posed a particular problem for critics. It was perceived to inflame conflicting passions in a way that had led Plato famously to banish poets from his ideal *Republic*; on these grounds Wollstonecraft castigated its pernicious effect on women's education in *Civil Society*:

Novels . . . tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly. . . . This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others.<sup>31</sup>

Sensibility's tendency to play with excess and arousal (with all the connotations of uncontrollable sexual excitation implied) was especially troublesome to moralists: feelings are *excited* and *stimulated* by the spectacle of suffering. Stylistically, Sensibility depended on intensification: heightened emotions, a language of superlatives, in the cause of rendering the actuality of feeling on the page, to induce 'real' response in a reader to a fictional, manufactured scene of pain, distress, overwhelming emotion. It was an ethic founded on material or psychological suffering induced by difference in status: the workings of sensibility in the opulent were aroused by observing a suffering subject, often a social or economic inferior (Sterne's Maria), or (as in the substantial Anglo-American body of sentimental literature addressing itself to slavery or the extirpation of native Americans) a racial 'other'. In *Julia de Roubigné*, Mackenzie's philanthropic character Savillon ameliorates the conditions of the slaves under his control, and is rewarded by their self-abasing gratitude; more emphatically, and even more ambiguously, Sarah Scott's *Sir George Ellison* (1766) evokes the complex emotional economics of the hero's 'extacy' at the response of 'a numerous race of slaves' whom he

acquires on his marriage to a Jamaican wife, and treats humanely.<sup>32</sup> Godwin's narrative insists on the egotism of Fleetwood's benevolence, its capacity to satisfy some highly questionable impulses to emotional gratification.

An even more troubling possibility was that the integrity of individual identity might be threatened by sympathetic identification: in Mackenzie's periodical *The Mirror* the letter of Leontius tells how his ward becomes so closely identified with the sufferings of her friend, that she gives up her own life to take the friend's place after death. *The Man of Feeling* demonstrates repeatedly how intense sensibility and sympathetic identification, no matter how lovely to contemplate, in practice *unfits* its possessor for prudential, useful living. The book comes to an end when Harley dies, literally, of too much feeling. The sensible heart may be 'wounded', 'pierced' or 'stabbed' by the bolt of emotional contact through sight or touch. In a quasi-religious masochistic twist, pain itself became an index of virtue: Frances Greville's 'Prayer for Indifference' begged for release from the acute pain of sensitivity, thereby affirming the poet's (and reader's) superior sensibility. This is the poem Helen Maria Williams answered in 'To Sensibility' (1786), and Hannah More in her *Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle*:

. . . where bright imagination reigns,  
The fine-wrought spirit feels acuter pains:  
Where glow exalted sense, and sense refined,  
There keener anguish rankles in the mind;  
There feeling is diffused through every part,  
Thrills in each nerve, and lives in all the heart . . .  
(lines 67–72)

Again the spiritual and the bodily are mingled, with a strong leaven of moral superiority.

The literature of Sensibility disturbed its reader's quiescent state with seductive demands for emotional engagement. Repeated arousal might inflame the passions to 'the allurements of guilty pleasures' (*Charlotte Temple*, p. 101), but deaden the sensibilities. As a letter to the Editor of *The Bee* put it, 'let us beware of becoming spectators in scenes of cruelty, lest, by repeated and horrid spectacles of this kind, we lose the sympathetic sense which vibrates at the pain of another'.<sup>33</sup> Anna Barbauld offered a version of the same argument bolstered by physiological reference: 'Sensibility does not increase with exercise. By the constitution of our frame our habits increase, our emotions decrease, by repeated acts.'<sup>34</sup> As late as 1825 she wrote this 'Inquiry into Those Kinds of Distress Which Excite Agreeable Sensations', to address the uncomfortable, and sinister, possibility that suffering and sensibility could become a spectator sport, in which a reader's

private and perhaps guilty sympathies might be aroused without being educated. There was a kind of sublimated aggression in this vicarious suffering female body, that the Marquis de Sade would be quick to spot and exploit: the association of pain with pleasure raised questionable connotations of passivity implied by the spectatorial aspect of sympathy. Observation of another's pain is the highly questionable pleasure offered within an aesthetics of sensibility – 'exquisite' torture though it may be to overlook a fellow being in torment. Structurally, too, repetition without progression is a fundamental feature of pornography, which operates by a duplicitous principle of intensification.

Melodrama and Sensibility also focused unease about the relationship between critical value and popularity in the first era of mass publishing and widening literacy. Sensibility coincided with an explosion in the habit of reading, the proliferation of circulating libraries, reading societies, periodicals and journals. To contemporary commentators there were inescapable parallels between the burgeoning national wealth of commercial society, the cultural capital of an emergent bourgeois class with leisure and affluence, and what we might call the 'emotional capital' of sensibility. Smith's two great published works, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) were both founded on a principle of *exchange* – of sympathetic emotion, in the first case, of capital and goods in the second. Parallel in some sense, the precise equivalence between them was actively contested, and the source of inquiries carried on in literary genres from political economy to ethics, from historiography to domestic drama. Sentiment and sympathy, however 'heartfelt' the emotion, however 'private' the occasion or scene, are always issues of social and cultural politics in the literature that embodied and investigated them. If the moral sense was universal, and innate, in all undamaged individuals, its currency as a measure of value could only be quantitative – that is, a quasi-utilitarian measure derived from Hume, and based in the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people. The economics of Sensibility (its 'use-value') existed in tension with its spontaneous, wayward and unpredictable nature; it was a real question as to whether the second could be harnessed to the first by instruction, whether physiology and imagination could be taught universally to respond responsibly, sociably, predictably.

The public discourse of Sensibility was in fact shaped by the concerns and interests of a select group of individuals. The universal claims made on its behalf by Smith rest in practice on a reading public with leisure to observe, to reflect on and to understand the mechanics of sympathetic response. In socio-political terms, Sensibility articulated the values of an emergent middle class; it reflected anxiety about virtue in a newly privatized social context,

no longer (like the 'Roman Virtue' of the Augustan public sphere) available to view in action, but in the domestic sphere, where women and men were defined in terms of the quality of their internal responses, their emotional natures. Writing on sensibility was always concerned to discover, and to represent, the 'bounds beyond which virtuous feelings cease to be virtue', to convey the imperative need for 'the decisions of sentiment [to be] subject to the controul of prudence' (Mackenzie, *Works*, v: 17). Mackenzie's lightly moralized fables about young ladies who fly into conniptions about the drowning of flies in cream-pots (v: 303) but neglect their families and servants are as much about how to balance, control and regulate sensibility as how to encourage or nourish it.

Smith had expanded Hutcheson's alignment of ethics with aesthetics to define the *quality* of response: 'The amiable virtues consist in that degree of sensibility which surprises by its exquisite and unexpected delicacy and tenderness' (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 25). As a crucial determinant of taste, sensibility was a yardstick of value whose *exclusivity* was underlined by the literature. The episode where estranged father and fallen daughter are reunited in *The Man of Feeling* is orchestrated by Harley, the eponym of Sensibility; recovered from their transports of emotion, father and daughter run to embrace him,

and made the warmest protestations of gratitude for his favours. We would attempt to describe the joy which Harley felt on this occasion, did it not occur to us, that one half of the world could not understand it though we did; and the other half will, by this time, have understood it without any description at all. (p. 52)

The coerciveness is clear: a reader of Sensibility will share these emotions without instruction; without it, no amount of description will suffice. The more tears you can shed, the finer a sensibility you exhibit, the better person you are. The value of the reader's taste was computed according to the intensity of her response. 'No species of composition,' wrote Mackenzie's Lounger in 1785, 'is more generally read by one class of readers, or more undervalued by another, than that of the novel' (*Works*, v: 176).

As a working generalization, we might say that since Wordsworth and Coleridge's controversial experiments on the public taste, the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, poets and critics have had an interest in theorizing a split between popular pleasure (the maligned felicific calculus developed by Jeremy Bentham from Hume), and aesthetic value. Sensibility as a mode was enmired in its own popularity and consequently suffered the subsequent embarrassment of the popular, both in the sense of unease, and of entanglement or encumbrance. The aesthetics of Sensibility as a mode of ethical representation

became, incipiently, implicated with the politics of democratic representation. Wordsworth and Coleridge were agreed that the purpose of poetry is pleasure, and both felt that their battle against the depraved taste created by eighteenth-century poetic artifice had to be won by appealing to the responses and the pleasures of Samuel Johnson's notional figure, the 'common reader' or (in their terms) 'real men'. But what gave most pleasure to most people, apparently, was the literature of Sensibility, denigrated by Wordsworth as a 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation'. He proposed pleasure 'of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry' ('Preface' (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 249, 251). This 'grand elementary principle of pleasure' constituted 'the native and naked dignity of man', by which he 'knows, and *feels*, and lives, and moves'. Developing the idea of 'taste' as the product of acute sensitivity, at once 'natural' and highly cultivated, Wordsworth's 'Poet' is 'a man . . . endowed with *more* lively sensibility, *more* enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a *greater* knowledge of human nature, and a *more* comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind'; he is the 'Man of Feeling' redeemed from the prison of inarticulacy to 'a *greater* readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels', and his universality is confirmed by his uniqueness ('Preface' (1802), pp. 255–8, italics added). Wordsworth's debt to eighteenth-century Sensibility and his crucial departures from it are clear. The poet produces pleasure by his ability to provoke a reader's natural, sympathetic responses to shared human experience. But though he is a 'man speaking to men', this passage stresses throughout not so much their common humanity, as the quantitative *difference* (which becomes in effect a qualitative one) of the poet's sensibilities from those of his audience. His special ability rests on a quite exceptional degree of human sensibility. And, when he does not 'find' the necessary sympathetic emotions in the world beyond himself, he is 'habitually impelled to *create*' them within the magic circle of his own self. When sympathy turns to find its responses within, aesthetics can become an entirely singular affair.

Because of the uncertain status of 'sympathy' (located as it was variously between the somatic, the figurative, and the ethical imperative) Sensibility was by its nature an 'impure' and unstable literary mode, readily combining with and leaking into other forms of literary representation: we can trace literary continuities through streams as diverse as the Gothic novel and the cult of the occult, nineteenth-century social realism (in particular the sentimental emotionalism of Dickens's novels), Wordsworth's celebration of the primitive virtues of Cumberland peasant life in touch with the 'beautiful and permanent forms of nature' ('Preface' (1800), p. 245), operatic melodrama, and Victorian religious and temperance tracts. There are suggestive points

of intersection between Sensibility and the picturesque mode in which observation of ruins in the outdoors leads to withdrawal into 'private space' of contemplation. Both, also, respond to the pathos of the present, the way it constantly evanesces into pastness, and the difficulty of grasping it as it withdraws. Behind all lay implicit acknowledgement that the imagination was as powerful as reason in ruling not only human behaviour but perception itself. 'This,' as the most uncompromising theorist of human nature on empirical principles put it in 1739, 'is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd' (Hume, *Treatise*, p. 49). In this framework, the passions control the production of knowledge across all domains, and Sensibility is the shared, transferable, instrument of knowledge and understanding, the one factor that neutralizes or overwhelms intellectual scepticism. From the *Treatise* onwards, Sensibility was, implicitly or overtly, concerned as much with self-writing as with the nature of social relationships.

Rousseau was the first master and theorist of modern autobiography's foundation in imaginative sensibility:

Assume that someone is in a painful situation which you know perfectly well: you will not easily be moved to cry in seeing the afflicted person, but give him time to tell you everything he feels, and soon you will burst into tears.<sup>35</sup>

This is exactly the scene of perfect sympathetic communication imagined at the beginning of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), when Walton finds 'the brother of my heart' in the suffering Victor Frankenstein; identifying with the inventor's 'elevated' emotions Walton is almost overwhelmed: 'My thoughts, and every feeling of my soul, have been drunk up by the interest for my guest, which this tale, and his own elevated and gentle manners, have created.'<sup>36</sup> But the body of Frankenstein's tale is a fable of the *failure* of sympathy between the creator and his creature. When the monster seeks to awaken Frankenstein's sympathy, the latter cannot accept his bonds of connection with the storyteller. The monster, like another Rousseauvian figure, the 'solitary walker' of the later (posthumously published) *Reveries*, is a man 'made' for sympathy, but cast out into solitude. Rousseau's solitary takes refuge not (like Frankenstein's monster or Fleetwood) in misanthropy, but in self-reflection, turning inward to his own responses and thereby becoming a kind of literary progenitor of the solitary pleasures of Wordsworth's persona in *The Prelude*. Emotional extravagance here is linked to its etymological roots with vagary, wandering, as Rousseau's *promeneur solitaire* is represented as an outcast of a sociable world.<sup>37</sup> Solitary walking or communion in the outdoors replaces the hothouse interiors of the eighteenth-century novel as the characteristic 'site' of Sensibility in the Romantic period. Its alienated



aspect is embodied in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, cast out of relationship with nature and super-nature into the abyss of nightmare and monstrosity:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
 Alone on a wide wide sea;  
 And Christ would take no pity on  
 My soul in agony.

(*Lyrical Ballads*, p. 19)

In different ways from Scott or Austen, Coleridge and Mary Shelley recovered narrative from sensibility. Telling one's own story to elicit sympathetic response in a reader relocated literary pleasures in the revival of fable, beyond vicarious enjoyment of the protagonist's pain to a positive celebration of the 'shaping power' of imagination.

Like another unstable mode, pastoral, Sensibility always includes or implies its shadow-self:

. . . exclamations, tender tones, fond tears,  
 and all the graceful drapery Pity wears;  
 these are not Pity's self, they but express  
 her inward sufferings by their pictured dress;  
 and these fair marks, reluctant I relate,  
 these lovely symbols may be counterfeit.

(More, 'Sensibility', lines 271–6)

*The Man of Feeling* was specifically parodied by Robert Fergusson's 'Sow'; contemporary magazines and journals supplied a run of burlesques. An 'Ode to Sensibility' published in the *Scots Magazine* in 1772 is prefaced by a headnote that draws attention to the composite aesthetic of the 'Age of Sensibility':

I have often thought, that future ages will be strangely puzzled about the true characteristics of this age . . . with respect to literature. There is no such thing among us as original prose. . . . And as to our poetry, the little, the very little we have of it is so trimmed, and so refined, and so full of zigzag sentiments and disjointed expressions, that it is impossible for common understandings to conceive it.<sup>38</sup>

The revival of interest in Sensibility as a literary mode coincides with post-modern recognition of the artifice in all aesthetic and ethical systems. Raising the issue of inauthenticity as an inseparable aspect of the 'authentic' voice of personal feeling underlines the staged – and therefore potentially stagey – nature of all representation. After Freud, representations of repression and excess seem inescapably symptomatic, but re-historicized into the cultural, political and philosophical contexts of the 'long eighteenth century', the

generically unstable modes of Sensibility can be viewed as opening discussions about the consensual prospects of normative response in a cultural climate in which the relativity of value had become a present spectre. Sensibility's capacity to voice the aesthetic possibility of the excess of pleasure over use value – an emotional economy of expression surviving in an ethical and commercial climate of prudent exchange – remains equally challenging.

## NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter, 'sensibility' refers to emotional, physical or ethical qualities; 'Sensibility' to the literary modes that embody and interrogate these characteristics.
2. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, v.iii.256–60; 269–72.
3. Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers, rev. and intr. Stephen Bending and Stephen Bygrave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 50–1.
4. Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Paul Schlicke (London: Everyman, 1995), pp. 555–6.
5. Cited in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 441.
6. *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 253.
7. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. John Beer (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 360.
8. Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 98.
9. Susan Manning (ed.), *The Works of Henry Mackenzie*, 8 vols. (London: Routledge / Thoemmes Press, 1996), v: 18.
10. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 302, 394.
11. Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (1759), p. 106.
12. William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 114 (lines 27–8); Keats to J. H. Reynolds, 21 September 1819 and 3 May 1818, in John Keats, *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings, rev. and intr. Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 272, 88.
13. Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 3 vols. (1762), I: 121.
14. William Godwin, *Fleetwood: or, The New Man of Feeling*, ed. Gary Handwerk and A. A. Markley (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2001), pp. 47–8.
15. Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Claire Lamont (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 228, 314–15.
16. Hannah More, *Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle*, in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 24–34 (line 164).
17. See Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union: Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), ch. 4.
18. Vicesimus Knox, 'On Modern Criticism', in *Essays, Moral and Literary*, 15th edn, 3 vols. (1803), I: 164.

19. Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects, 1787*, intr. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford: Woodstock, 1994), p. 53 (lines 55–6).
20. Henry Mackenzie *Julia de Roubigné*, ed. Susan Manning (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1999), p. 68.
21. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), ed. Robert de Maria, Jr. (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 217.
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23. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64), II: 175.
24. Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 49.
25. Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey and Continuation of the Bramine's Journal*, ed. Melvyn New and W. G. Day (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 165.
26. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 48; see also pp. viii, 15.
27. Ioan Williams (ed.), *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 81.
28. Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple*, ed. Ann Douglas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 46. Douglas's introduction makes a case for the particular association of American Sensibility with melodrama.
29. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Eloise*, trans. and ed. Judith H. McDowell (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), p. 78.
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33. *The Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer* 1 (9 February 1791), 213.
34. *Works of A. L. Barbauld*, 2 vols. (1825), II: 227.
35. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, trans. John Scott (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 291.
36. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, ed. M. K. Joseph (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1980), p. 210.
37. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).
38. 'Character of Modern Poetry, with a specimen', *Scots Magazine* 34 (November 1772), 619.

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