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0521552214 - The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel

Markman Ellis

Excerpt

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I have this very moment finish'd reading a novel call'd the Vicar of Wakefield . . . I own I was tempted to thro' the book aside – but there was something in the situation of his family, which if it did not interest me, at least drew me on – and as I proceeded, I was better pleased.–The description of his rural felicity, his simple, unaffected contentment – and family domestic happiness, gave me much pleasure – but still, I was not satisfied, a *something* was wanting to make the book satisfy me – to make me *feel* for the Vicar in every line he writes, nevertheless, before I was half thro' the first volume, I was, as I may truly express myself, *surprised into tears* – and in the second volume, I really sobb'd. It appears to me, to be impossible any person could read this book thro' with a dry eye at the same time the best part of it is that which turns one's grief out of doors, to open them to laughter. He advances many very bold and singular opinions – for example, he avers that murder is the sole crime for which death ought to be the punishment, he goes even farther, and ventures to affirm that our laws in regard to penalties and punishments are *all* too severe.¹

When Frances Burney (1752–1840) wrote this passage in her diary in 1768, she was only sixteen years of age, nearly a decade before the first of her four novels, *Evelina* (1778), was to command popular acclaim.² Her reading of Oliver Goldsmith's sentimental novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) has much to commend it, especially in her perception of the mixture of humour and pathos in the novel.³ Weeping almost against her will, Burney finds the novel irresistible, causing her to remark that the book has increased her 'relish for *minute, heartfelt* writing' and causing her family to call her '*feeling Fanny*'.⁴ Burney relates her emotional response to the novel to a more intellectual train of thought. As her feelings were aroused by the Vicar's story, so too were her opinions, in her perception that Goldsmith's novel offers a commentary on the severity of judicial punishment and the death penalty.⁵ That she rejects Goldsmith's

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criticism is arguably of less importance than the fact that the issue attracted Burney's attention, and compels her to comment, to assay her own opinion.⁶ The reason Burney finds Goldsmith's sententious opinions remarkable and worthy of comment is quite simply the force of the sentimental mode – because the book moves her emotions. As she remarks a little later in the diary 'This Vicar is a very venerable old man – his distresses must move you', even though (as she admits) the novel is, considered as a novel, unexpected and unaccountable: 'There is but very little story, the plot is thin, the incidents very rare, the sentiments uncommon.'⁷

Burney's assessment of Goldsmith's plan for prison reform is significant, simply because of those characteristics that make Burney who she is: her youth, her lack of formal education, her station in life and above all, her gender.⁸ She was, as already noted, only sixteen years old; she had been educated at home (unlike her supposedly more talented sisters, who had been sent to boarding school in Paris); and she lived in London with her father and step-mother. Her journal, begun in March 1768, shows her to be, above all, concerned with being 'proper', with maintaining appearances, so as not to compromise the social aspirations of her father, 'who had been struggling for years to raise himself from the lowly role of musician to the more respected status of a man of letters', and whose amanuensis she was for many years.⁹ But she was also a woman of fashion; committed to the new culture of sentimentalism: possessing, her step-mother said, 'as feeling a Heart as ever a Girl had!'¹⁰ She imbibed this capacity for 'feeling' from novels, even though for a young woman, such reading was an interest that should be indulged secretly (like writing her *Journal*). In subsequent months, Burney read several other sentimental novels, including works by Laurence Sterne, Samuel Richardson and Marivaux. Burney's comments on capital punishment (and her spirited scriptural rebuttal of Goldsmith) draw attention to the conjunction between two modes in the sentimental novel: on the one hand its efficiency in moulding the emotions and feelings of readers; and on the other, its insertion of matters of political controversy into the text of the novel itself.

The sentimental novel, the dominant literary form of the late eighteenth century, was innovative as a form largely because it attracted an unprecedented audience to literature. This readership was not only numerically larger than that previously attracted, it was also notable because it was made up of a new social alliance. The sentimental novel addressed women as much as men, and, increasingly, those who belonged to the middle station of life, the social level between manual

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workers and the gentry that Dorothy Marshall characterised as ‘the Middling Sort’.¹¹ This audience conceived of novel reading as a pursuit of leisure, as a variety of entertainment alongside diversions such as pleasure gardens, plays and periodicals. These readers were also amateur, agreeing amongst themselves that novel reading did not require or demand extensive intellection or education. Paradoxically, then, by addressing an audience that was disenfranchised and lacking power in political life, the sentimental novel effectively created a new political role for literature. Characterised by this focus on youth, simplicity and ‘natural feeling’, the sentimental novels appeared to be opposed to the rigid rules of correct and elaborate decorum typical of the learned hierarchies of early eighteenth century literature, and as such, they were widely recognised as an innovative, even radical, event in literary history.

Excepting perhaps the last two decades, sentimentalism has never been the focus of sustained critical or theoretical debate. In this way at least, sentimentalism is distinctly unlike Romanticism, its chronological neighbour, which has been for several generations of critics one of the prime sites for applied theory – whether by New Critics, deconstruction or more recent ‘historicist’ approaches. One of the unforeseen advantages of this paucity of criticism is that sentimentalism studies remain alive to the peculiarity and individuality of the sentimental text. Recent criticism on sentimentalism has not witnessed the construction of a critical consensus like the ‘Romantic ideology’ (to use the phrase of Jerome McGann’s book of the same title) – a concretisation of Romanticism into a unitary, self-conscious and centralised object of power.¹² Sentimentalism remains polyphonic, with aspects that are resistant, even subversive of such constructions.

Such academic interest in the study of the sentimental novel that there has been in recent years has occurred for reasons that are themselves historically analysable. In the preface to *The Rape of Clarissa* (1982), Terry Eagleton tendentiously remarked that ‘the wager of this book is that it is just possible that we may now once again be able to read Samuel Richardson’, and indeed there is a sense in which the sentimental novel is ‘readable’ again now for the first time since the eighteenth century, after nearly two centuries of being perceived as of marginal interest and negligible importance, a topic for literary history, not criticism.¹³ To an extent, the cause of this resurgence is institutional: attributable to or explicable by the politics and history of ‘English’ studies in the last few decades. Those characteristics of sentimental novels once held in opprobrium, such as the novel’s preference for (or appearance of) the

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unpolished and the fragmentary, have been reappraised by recent critical enterprise, especially in more historicised approaches. The kind of questions asked of literature not only affect the answer but also the choice of texts addressed by the question, so that the kinds of literary criticism operating in recent decades, and the variety I pursue in this book (text-focussed, historicist and materialist), permit the sentimental novel to be read critically as it never has been before.

The paradox of sentimentalism, simply stated, is that these novels are the site of considerable political debate and that this is so despite and because of the extraordinary texture of the novels, with their focus on romantic-love plots, their devotion to the passions and the rhetoric of tears and blushes, and their fragmentary and digressive narrative. In the following chapters I examine the inter-connection between the sentimental novel and political controversy in the latter half of the eighteenth century. These chapters focus on three case studies: the emergence of anti-slavery and slavery-reform opinion; the debate around the utility and economics of canals; and the movement for the foundation of a charity for the relief of penitent prostitutes. In the final chapter, I examine how this debate in the novel was transmuted into a debate on the novel, as sentimentalism itself becomes a controversy.

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CHAPTER I

Sensibility, history and the novel

Sensibility and the sentimental were a matter of informed and energetic debate in the second half of the eighteenth century, although no consensus was reached. The narrator of an anonymous and virtually unknown novel called *Matilda, or the Efforts of Virtue* (1785) enthused that ‘*Sentiment is a refinement of moral feeling, which animates us in performing the dictates of Reason, and introduces many graces and decorums to the great duties of Morality, which are plainly felt by the Sentimental mind, though not easily defined. It adorns our actions with a certain delicacy, which not only makes them just, but bright.*’¹ Although resistant to definition, sensibility’s bright lustre was desirable and attractive to many writers. Just over a decade later, a philosophically minded columnist in *The Monthly Magazine* stated that ‘Sensibility is that peculiar structure, or habitude of mind, which disposes a man to be easily moved, and powerfully affected, by surrounding objects and passing events.’² A newspaper, the *London Chronicle* (6 July 1775), described sensibility as ‘a lively and delicate feeling, a quick sense of the right and wrong, in all human actions, and other objects considered in every view of morality and taste’.³ These writers find sensibility culturally important, but worryingly vague. This enthusiastic debate on the origin, cultivation, extent, value and consequences of sensibility left definitions imprecise and flexible. Much of this debate was by its nature ephemeral, and while it has largely evaded historical enquiry, some understanding of it can be uncovered in the occasional literature of the period, in periodical essays, popular magazines and the novel.

Most contemporary critics and apologists argued that sensibility was a positive influence and a desirable virtue – a ‘pleasure’ that improves the mind of the individual, and society in general. As an essay in *The Universal Magazine* declared in 1778, ‘The character of delicacy of sentiment . . . is certainly a great refinement on humanity.’ The writer reiterated the advantages of the sentimental, stressing the benevolent impulses imparted by it:

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It must be allowed that Delicacy of Sentiment . . . adds greatly to the happiness of mankind, by diffusing an universal benevolence. It teaches men to feel for others as for themselves; it disposes us to rejoice with the happy, and by partaking to increase their pleasure . . . It excites a pleasing sensation in our own breast, which if its duration be considered, may be placed among the highest gratifications of sense.⁴

Sensibility was the occasion of some anxiety, however, because the pleasure it invoked was enigmatic and ambiguous. As an enthusiast in *The Lady's Magazine* declared in 1775, sensibility leads 'to the abodes of misery – to scenes of distress' and worried that 'Misfortunes lead to wisdom, but how painful the road?' Sensibility was a source of pride, of pleasure and of social attainment, but the personal and emotional cost was less unambiguous:

Sensibility – thou source of human woes – thou aggrandizer of evils! – Had I not been possessed of thee – how calmly might my days have passed! – Yet would I not part with thee for worlds. We will abide together – both pleased and pained with each other. Thou shalt ever have a place in my heart – be the sovereign of my affections, and the friend of my virtue.

Sensibility to this writer is both the name of a certain feeling, and at the same time an instructive guide to moral conduct: 'Where thou pointest the way I'll chearfully follow. Lead me to the abodes of misery – to scenes of distress.' Sensibility is here possessed of a complex aesthetic logic akin to the sublime, that discovers pleasure in distress and misery, albeit that sensibility is a sublime untouched by transcendence. Anxiety about sensibility revolves around its enigmatic ambiguity of experience. 'Humanity must feel – but reason checks the overflowings of grief – religion marks the bound – sensibility lends the tear.'⁵ Unable to precisely locate or identify the sentimental, this anonymous writer remains dedicated to its declarations of virtuous feeling and benevolence. As the narrator of 'Rosalia; Or, The Inconveniences of Sensibility', a tale of 'excruciating tortures of love', concludes in *The Lady's Magazine* of May 1773: 'It is a misfortune to be born with a heart which has so much *sensibility*.'⁶

The writer of an 'Essay on Sensibility' in *The Scots Magazine* in 1787, identified only as 'A Lady', discussed the routes to happiness, favourably comparing sensibility and good works to insensibility and evil. 'A benevolent and affectionate disposition . . . may prove the source of many pleasures; but it may be objected, that it will prove the source of many sorrows also.' She characterised this 'imperfect state' as the true quality of 'Sensibility'.⁷ In the preface to a poem called *An Essay on Sensibility*

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(1789), the poet William Laurence Brown stated that ‘the question he has undertaken to discuss is, Whether sensibility or the want of it, is, upon the whole, most productive of comfort and happiness in the course of life’;⁸ and the reviewers mostly found him in favour, although one noted that the poet prevents the reader from following the argument ‘by extending his researches to an unnecessary length’ – the six parts covered 190 pages in all.⁹ An anonymous poet in the Scottish periodical *The Bee* in 1792 implored Sensibility

To *me* thy magic influence impart;
And all those sweet vibrations that but move
To soften and to humanise the heart!¹⁰

Without sensibility, the poet declares, feelings are coarse and life brutish – but sensibility itself remains mystically imprecise, lacking even elementary logical rigour.

In the words of contemporaries, the sentimental is consistently defined negatively, as the space between more extreme constructions, as a variety of weak thought that will not bear analysis, that escapes or evades discussion, that is not to be analysed by reason or rational debate. An apologist for sensibility in *The Universal Magazine* opined in 1778 that ‘Whatever disposition tends to soften, without weakening the mind, must be cherished.’¹¹ In searching for a clear statement of ‘sentiment’, *The Universal Magazine* in 1785 declared this enigmatic moral feeling was ‘plainly felt by the Sentimental mind, though not easily defined’.¹² Reading the great mass of contemporary writings on sensibility in the mid to late eighteenth century, one is struck most forcefully by its imprecision and repetitiveness. Weak, hybrid and double-hinged, sensibility is not easily located within the enlightenment rationality of the philosophers and scientists. Rather than an orderly sequence of declarative explanation, clarifying revision and confident synthesis, contemporary sentimental theory presents an incoherent face to history. Revisions, rather than clearing up incoherencies, proliferate more of their own. The history of late eighteenth-century sensibility is not itself an enlightenment discourse, but a philosophical nightmare of muddled ideas, weak logic and bad writing.

The terms ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentimental’ denote a complex field of meanings and connotations in the late eighteenth century, overlapping and coinciding to such an extent as to offer no obvious distinction.¹³ Despite the attempts of some recent critics, it is not possible to legislate between the closely allied terms ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentimental’ in the mid

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eighteenth century, especially as they are used in the novels. However, though sensibility and sentimental may not be separated, that is not because they share a single unitary meaning, but rather, they amalgamate and mix freely a large number of varied discourses. Sensibility operates within a variety of fields of knowledge, beyond the strict confines of the history of literature. These include: (1) the history of ideas (moral sense philosophy); (2) the history of aesthetics (taste); (3) the history of religion (latitudinarians and the rise of philanthropy); (4) the history of political economy (civic humanism and *le doux commerce*); (5) the history of science (physiology and optics); (6) the history of sexuality (conduct books and the rise of the domestic woman); and (7) the history of popular culture (periodicals and popular writing). The novel of sensibility is the amalgamation of these differing discourses; yet, paradoxically, literary sensibility is distinct and separate from these discourses. As this introduction shows, no *one* other discourse can account for the sentimental novel. Rather, it is the sentimental novel that must account for itself. Sentimentalism discovers its power in the novel's freedom to mix genres and discourses freely. In the novel, in other words, sensibility comes together.

To read the sentimental novel in this way is to ask it to perform some difficult and complex ideological work. The novel is a genre where different and competing categories of knowledge may be brought into a fruitful, coherent and consistent negotiation. Over fifty years ago, the Russian literary historian M. M. Bakhtin proposed a dialectical model of the form of the novel, recognising and valorising the presence of competing discourses or voices in the novel.¹⁴ Recent histories of the novel written in the shadow of Bakhtin, such as J. Paul Hunter's *Before Novels*, have been alive to the novel's distinctive generic 'heteroglossia' – that the novel is the conduit of competing discourses and voices; that it defies genre definition; that it need not be well made.¹⁵ Michael McKeon argues that the novel inherited a 'definitional volatility, a tendency to dissolve into its antithesis' despite the fact that it had also taken on the 'status of a new tradition'.¹⁶ Certainly in the case of the sentimental novel, the genre is a loose and floppy structure, capable of almost endless variation and innovation, committed to few rules about length, contents or approach. Because of this, the genre of the novel was perceived to be widely accessible, especially to those who were anxious about their social and cultural position: that is to say, those in the middle station of life, and women.

The novel as a genre took part in a wide-ranging transformation of society, a 'cultural revolution', in the words of the historian J. H. Plumb,

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in which literature ceased being the ‘pre-occupation of small specialised elites and [became] available for the mass of society to enjoy’.¹⁷ In the eighteenth century, Plumb argues, a mass audience developed around newspapers, magazines, pamphlet controversies and literature, which disseminated ideas to wider audiences through institutions and practices such as public readings in taverns, coffee houses, private libraries, circulating libraries. He argues that literature in this period tended towards a growth of provincialisation (that is, culture spread out from London to provincial cities), professionalisation (writers worked full-time and were economically dependent on their craft) and democratisation (access to reading and writing expanded to the middling sort, and women). In recent years, questions such as these have come to occupy the attention of both historians and critics, with approaches to a historical sociology of literature in such diverse work as Jerome McGann’s bibliographical study of romantic poetry or Robert Darnton’s study of the French book trade in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The English book trade and the sociology of the eighteenth-century novel has been clarified by the recent research of James Raven and the emergence of new electronic research tools like the *Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue*. The changing and widening commercial base of the book trade supported an increasing literary output, in particular ‘an upturn in publication in the last third of the century . . . both in total publication and in the specialist production of new novels’.¹⁹ Yet book-trade research remains an awkward and challenging field: like reading itself, the study of the history of novel reading remains in some senses a qualitative as well as quantitative process. Quantifying estimates of popular success in the market is only one facet of a wider analysis of the fascination of fiction: it does not discriminate between individual novels, or account for their power in or deformation by their reception by both readers and critics in public and in private.

SENTIMENTALISM AND THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

Many recent critics, taking a ‘history of ideas’ approach, have located the origin of literary sentimentalism in the writings of the moral philosophers of the early eighteenth century, constructing a history of sentimentalism – which might be called the ‘Enlightenment account’ – that traces the progressive refinement of ideas about virtue and society, benevolence and taste through the philosophical writings of the period. Some understanding of the scope and significance of this philosophical

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context to the discourse of the sentimental will be needed for this study. However, the intention of the following survey of some of the key texts of the ‘history of ideas’ approach is not only to rehearse (again) this material, but also to offer some ideas as to why this approach does not adequately account for sensibility in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Philosophy in the early eighteenth century was quite different from the professional discipline practised today. Without strict disciplinary boundaries, philosophy betrayed its allegiances to its progenitors, theology and natural philosophy. From the former, the philosophers had inherited the pursuit of the foundations of morals, of how the individual should act in society. Science, with its claim to certainty of knowledge, and the methodological project of empiricism, provided a model and a language to describe their observations, borrowing especially from contemporary theories of optics and physiology (such as Locke’s reformulation of Newton).

For the history of sentimentalism, the most consequential of these writings is the moral-sense school. Although the concept of a moral sense had been suggested by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, the term gains its significance in the work of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) and Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746). In his *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit* (1711) Shaftesbury argued that moral decisions are not made by reason but by a moral sense, a sixth sense equivalent to the other senses of sight and taste, for example. When cultivated by self-reflexive refinement, this moral sense enables rational creatures to distinguish right from wrong as immediately and spontaneously as the eye distinguishes beauty from ugliness, or the tongue distinguishes sweet from bitter. ‘Sense of Right and Wrong therefore being as natural to us as *natural Affection* it-self, and being a first Principle in our Constitution and Make; there is no speculative Opinion, Persuasion or Belief, Which is capable *immediately* or *directly* to exclude or destroy it.’ Virtue, Shaftesbury argues, lies in following the natural affections, ‘such as are founded in Love, Complacency, Goodwill, and in a Sympathy with the Kind or Species’. In this view, man is innately benevolent, discovering a joy of self-approval arising from the natural desire to help others. These notions of natural virtue in the moral sense proved attractive to novelists and poets, as did other aspects of Shaftesbury’s thought, such as his Stoicism and environmental benevolism (‘the whole System of Animals, together with that of Vegetables, and all other things in this inferiour World, [should] be properly comprehended in *one System* of a