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Excerpt

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Introduction: the politics of tears

‘Daddy, were the Indians goodies?’ The question, delivered, like all the best unanswerable children’s questions, over breakfast and without apparent warning, has a genealogy which takes us to the heart of the matter. A few weeks before, in response to questions about the story of the cowboys and the Indians, I had explained to my six-year-old son that there might be a way of telling the story other than the established one: the cowboys had landed in the Indians’ country and, one way and another, had destroyed their society and all but wiped them out. Here was a liberal parent trying, gently and without melodramatic excess, to encourage critical thinking about a powerful collective myth of our society. My contribution – recounted here, needless to say, in adultspeak – had, essentially, been to attribute agency to the cowboys: *they* had landed, *they* had wiped out the Indians; implicit in my version was a state of harmony, a prehistory lying beyond the irruption of narrative; and, clearly, my intervention was a moral evaluation, in the sense that I was questioning the identification with the heroic cowboys and setting straight the historical record. John’s delayed-action response, based as it was on a retranslation of my remarks into the logic of story-telling, demonstrated an impeccable understanding of what I had been trying to say. His question struck me then as a particularly vivid confirmation of the kind of links between narratives, value-systems and the construction of history which this book attempts to chart. Most importantly for the analysis of sentimentalism, this six-year-old had spontaneously reinterpreted the narrative function of *victim* as the moral function of

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goody: the character who is devoid of agency, the one to whom things happen, is, in this system, the bearer of the positive moral charge.

Narratives of misfortune feature prominently in our society's discourse about itself. From the British miners' strike of 1984–5 to the Gulf War, from the Falklands to the demonisation of Gadaffi, the dominant media have shown that they know how to frame a hard-luck story in such a way that the right moral and ideological conclusions are drawn. Nor is this only a feature of the dominant media: despite the left's suspicion of 'sentimental' socialism – which, like Eugène Sue's, is superficial and unscientific – victims remain a crucial figure in the denunciations of injustice which figure in the left-wing press from *L'Humanité* to *Socialist Worker*. In fictional discourses, too, whether it be popular novels or the visual media, writers continue to portray the humanity of suffering heroes and heroines, and audiences continue to respond to these narratives' attempts to draw them into a charmed realm of identification with their protagonists.

In that sense, it seems to me that we are still operating within a nexus of relations which was constituted during the Enlightenment. The purpose of this book is to piece together these relations, and to demonstrate their structural coherence in late eighteenth-century France. Narratives of misfortune fill the pages of the sub-literature of the period. Of course, such narratives are not an invention of the eighteenth century, any more than the notions of pity and sympathy which they articulate, and which have a long religious and humanist tradition behind them. What is new is that fictional narrative becomes a privileged site for the self-conscious expression of such notions: this is part of a new relationship between text and society, mediated by the spread of reading and related, both as cause and effect, to the emergence of public opinion and to the whole process of secularisation. On the one hand, then, I want to show how sentimental narratives can be read as a figure of the social relationship which lies at the heart of the Enlightenment project: a project of social solidarity and sympathy, but also one in which notions of community and public opinion come to

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play an increasingly crucial role. Conversely, it will be necessary to look beyond narrative texts to areas such as historiography, political discourse, social pamphlets, in order to show their dependence on structures – narrative, linguistic, discursive – which belong to the tradition of the sentimental narrative. The ambition, clearly, is an interdisciplinary one: my aim is to trace a structure across boundaries, and to suggest the centrality of sentimentalism in the cultural patterns of the period.

Sentimentalism in the eighteenth century was, of course, not confined to France. Britain had the ‘man of feeling’, Sterne, Mackenzie; Germany had *Sturm und Drang*, Lessing, Goethe; Russia, the work of Karamzin.¹ This universality in itself suggests some fundamental social and cultural realignment to which sentimentalism is intimately connected: the emergence of new social forces, their increasing self-awareness as actors on the social and historical scene, and new definitions of the social subject. But if the fundamental question is that of the triangular relationship between sentimentalism, Enlightenment and these social transformations, it is perhaps the French case which is the most instructive. Various reasons may be advanced for this: the high degree of integration of literary and philosophical preoccupations in the French Enlightenment; its strongly developed self-awareness, related to social and ideological polarisation; and, the ultimate expression of this polarisation and self-awareness, the French Revolution itself which, as a discursive event, brings into perfect but short-lived focus the interdependence of narrative and history, of text and social project. At the same time, however, the Revolution represents a turning-point: the Terror represents a limit to the sentimental vision, and more than any one event signals a partial split between the sentimental vision and the historical optimism of Enlightenment. It is from this dissociation, and the concomitant realignment of elements of sentimentalism with an anti-revolutionary, anti-utopian, organicist vision, that some of what we call Romanticism will emerge.

In methodological terms, I believe that the key to understanding the social and historical insertion of sentimentalism is

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to define it in *formal* (as opposed to purely *thematic*) terms. That fundamental choice explains my preference for the term *sentimentalism* over the more familiar *sensibilité*. *Sentimental* and *sentimentalism* imply a formal structure: one can speak of a sentimental narrative, sentimental discourse, etc., whereas the French *sensible* qualifies the observing individual, and *sensibilité* refers to a phenomenon of a psychological or a socio-psychological order. Such dimensions are, of course, crucial: if *sentimentalism* can be defined in the first place as a narrative structure, in which the happiness and misfortune of the represented subject are the primary focus, it is equally important to see that onto this narrative structure is grafted a second level of meaning, which can be defined as a structure of *observation* or *perception*. As well as representing a reality, the sentimental text represents the reaction to that reality of an observing subject, and in that sense we are witnessing the codification of a kind of reception aesthetic. But the psychological and socio-psychological are to be seen operating *within texts*: *sensibilité*, for all its status as a documented form of social behaviour, has its roots in texts which represent, repeat and celebrate the act of being moved. Furthermore, the need for formal definitions is only strengthened if a corpus of minor literature is to be used: its power as a method of gaining access to past mentalities and ideologies lies in its absence of self-consciousness, its historical naivety, but a formal approach must be used to resolve the endlessly repetitive proliferation of narrative segments and features into a structure which makes historical sense and permits a movement outward to other levels of cultural patterning.

For a long time, attempts to understand the literary and social phenomenon of *sensibilité* in eighteenth-century France were framed by the now outmoded dichotomy between reason and sentiment. An analysis which attempts to demonstrate the fundamental solidarity of sentimentalism and Enlightenment obviously rejects that dichotomy; moreover, to the extent that the reason–sentiment opposition is replicated in a thematically based understanding of the relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism, my approach adds weight to the view

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that the transition from one to the other, if transition there was, is to be understood differently – notably in terms of the nature of the relationship between text and society. The reason–sentiment dichotomy was perhaps most successfully challenged, from the early 1960s onwards, by Roland Mortier, who argued that its demolition would involve an interdisciplinary effort to break down ‘les classifications thématiques coupées de toute référence et dépourvues d’une nécessaire insertion dans des ensembles cohérents’. For Mortier, the opposition was essentially a creation of polemicists of the Consulate and Empire, who sought to reject rationalism as having led directly to the Terror.² In his seminal ‘Unité ou scission du siècle des Lumières?’, Mortier argued that the effect of the Enlightenment–Romanticism opposition was to progressively empty Enlightenment of part of its historical meaning, and it was in this context that he called for a proper history of the term *sensibilité* in the eighteenth century.³ Frank Baasner has recently filled this gap;⁴ but others too have worked on the history of an interrelated set of terms having to do with sensibility, notably the late J. S. Spink in a series of very suggestive articles.⁵ The work of the ‘Centre d’étude de la sensibilité’ at the University of Grenoble is also situated in a lexicological perspective, and Sgard and Gilot’s contribution to *Le Preromantisme: hypothèque ou hypothèse?* is a highly intelligent discussion of the importance of ‘la vie intérieure’, that space which the sentimental novel seeks to claim as the heritage of the whole of humanity, but which, paradoxically, words can only partially externalise.⁶

Frank Baasner has shown how the reason–sentiment opposition informs much of the work on ‘Preromanticism’ done in France in the first half of this century, and before, by Lanson, Mornet, Trahard, Van Tieghem and Monglond.⁷ A re-reading of these critics confirms Mortier’s view that it is the contextualisation of the literary text which leads to a breakdown of this false dichotomy: it is when they actually envisage the literature of *sensibilité* not just as a corpus of themes, but as a phenomenon possessing real social referents and historical meanings, that these authors come closest to breaking its stranglehold and suggesting the kind of links which are crucial

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to my analysis. A case in point is Mornet's highly critical review of the first edition of Monglond's *Le Prérromantisme français*.⁸ Monglond's fundamentally reactionary analysis is that sentimentalism fulfils its ultimate destiny when it becomes the preferred discourse of the Terror; the boundary between Preromanticism and Romanticism proper lies at the point where the corrupt excesses of Robespierre's vision give way to the cultivation of a more sober, religious introspection.⁹ Mornet reacts violently to Monglond's analysis, and in doing so explicitly relates sentiment with Enlightenment preoccupations of justice and equality: the language of sensibility may appear degenerate to the modern mind, but this is no reason to conclude that 'il n'était pour ceux qui l'employaient, qui l'avaient découvert, qu'une vaine comédie'. Mornet goes on to defend the sensibility of the eighteenth century, and to suggest its continued relevance to the values of his day: the sensibility of these 'bourgeois pleurnicheurs'

a agi constamment, continûment et créé, sinon pour l'éternité, du moins pour un lointain avenir. Toute notre bienfaisance laïque, toute notre bonté sociale viennent d'elle; c'est elle que nous continuons dans nos sociétés protectrices des animaux, nos semaines de bonté, nos prix de vertu, nos récompenses aux sauveteurs, nos timbres anti-tuberculeux. On rencontre aujourd'hui dans Paris des cantines maternelles; il suffit qu'une femme se présente, que le lait sorte de son sein pour qu'elle trouve un bon repas; c'est une idée de Beaumarchais.¹⁰

Mornet, then, implicitly relates sentimentalism and the Enlightenment movement of social reform, and will develop these ideas in a few passages of his *Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française*, published in 1933.¹¹ Van Tieghem, much of whose work is bound up in the Preromanticism debate, also shows an awareness of the continuities between sentimentalism and Enlightenment concerns: like Mornet, he emphasises that the stylistic infelicity of sensibility should not lead us to conclude that its exponents are insincere:

c'est elle qui, en généralisant l'horreur de la souffrance, a réformé l'éducation, la justice, la société; c'est elle qui a, d'accord avec la 'philosophie' et peut-être plus efficacement, fait du XVIII^e siècle,

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suyvant la belle expression de Lavisse, 'un siècle humain, succédant à un siècle dur'.¹²

My opening chapter examines three sentimental writers, one relatively well known and two quite obscure. Although the presentation of these writers is obviously meant to adumbrate the more abstract analyses which will follow, I have tried to allow the diversity of both texts and authors to speak for itself, rather than suggesting that all sentimental texts can be read according to one overarching ideological scheme. In the following two chapters, I adopt a more abstract and theoretical approach: in chapter 2, with a good deal of reference to Diderot, and using notions drawn from Propp, Michael Fried and Jay Caplan¹³, I develop a double model of the sentimental text as *narrative* and as the site of an exchange between observed and observing subject; chapter 3, which makes extended reference to Rousseau, examines at some length the relationship between the process of sentimentalisation and the problematic of the place of the subject in the social hierarchy. Although I have chosen not to formalise the structure in this way, these three chapters in a sense form a unit: together, they move towards a general interpretation of sentimentalism as a social and ideological project. The following three chapters take this semi-abstract model as the basis for a return to texts: I examine the place of sentimental narrative and language in some key texts of the Revolution (chapter 4), the milieu of the *Idéologues* (chapter 5), and the work of Germaine de Staël (chapter 6). In these last two chapters the analysis is extended into the post-Revolutionary period; here, I have chosen to restrict myself to writing which remains fundamentally faithful to the Enlightenment tradition, no doubt out of personal prejudice, but also because my objective is to see which part, if any, of the sentimental heritage remains available to 'progressive' thinkers in the post-Revolutionary situation.

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CHAPTER I

Three sentimental writers

BACULARD D'ARNAUD

Baculard d'Arnaud (1718–1805) is the most well-known of the three sentimentalists presented in these case-studies. This reputation does not rest on literary merit, but rather on his enormous popularity during the eighteenth century, amply documented in Robert L. Dawson's 1976 study. Baculard's works were constantly reprinted during his lifetime, and *Les Époux malheureux* ranks as one of the most popular works of the century. Periodicals which serialised his works included the *Almanach des muses*, the *Discoureur*, the *Journal des dames*, the *Mercure* – from which he held a pension – and the *Année littéraire*. Grimm, despite his disdain, was obliged to acknowledge that the popularity which Baculard enjoyed must testify to talent of some kind. Baculard's reputation extended throughout Europe, and, as Dawson points out, in the restricted society formed by the republic of letters in the eighteenth century, Baculard d'Arnaud was acquainted with nearly everyone of import, ranging from Voltaire, his protector in the 1730s who eventually fell out with him in the Berlin affair, to Marie-Antoinette who possessed his works in a personally emblazoned copy.¹ Henri Coulet concludes:

Si à nos yeux, avec deux siècles de recul, il paraît ne jamais sortir des poncifs moraux et sociaux, il faut reconnaître qu'il a été l'un des premiers à les créer et à les répandre.²

Baculard's fiction is indeed representative of the preoccupations and structures of sentimental fiction in the late eighteenth century: obsessively, and loquaciously, he returns to

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the same standard themes, apparently safe in the knowledge that his unoriginal exploitation of tried and tested formulae will continue to be popular. This repetitiveness is in itself representative, in that one of the striking features of sentimental literature in the period is the faith in a particular set of categories and structures which is implied by the literature's endless repetition and proliferation: the more monotonous the rehearsal of sentimental themes, the stronger is our impression that they point to the unquestioned assumptions, the moral culture of a whole epoch.

But if Baculard stands as a representative of eighteenth-century sentimentalism, he is by no means an unproblematic figure. He raises, in particular, the question of the compatibility of sentimentalism with the Enlightenment project. Ridiculed by Diderot and Grimm, published by the *Mercure* and by Fréron's *Année littéraire*, Baculard is generally considered to be an enemy of *philosophie*, an analysis which rests on the twin foundations of his anti-rationalism and his religiosity. His anti-rationalism is in my view a minor contradiction: to see Baculard as an anti-Enlightenment writer on such a basis is implicitly to validate an equation between Enlightenment and rationalism which is false. The preoccupations which his fiction dramatises are consistent with the mainstream views of Enlightened opinion: the primacy of the heart in conjugal relations and of the voice of nature over the claims of established authority, the essential humanity of all men and women transcending – but, as in enlightened opinion, only up to a certain specified limit – social and hierarchical differences.

Baculard's religiosity represents a stronger challenge to the view that his sentimentalism is fundamentally consistent with Enlightenment attitudes. Jean-Louis Lecerle³ insists on the rewriting which *Les Epoux malheureux* underwent between 1745 and 1783, representing a toning-down of critical attitudes towards the church: the vicious priest Audoin who stands for the anti-humanist intolerance of the church is replaced by a tolerant disciple of Fénelon who instigates reconciliation in the divided La Bédoyère family. Dawson, for his part, confirms that religious preoccupations become more marked in Baculard's

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work as his career progresses. Indeed, a group of works bespeaks a fascination with the cloister which it is difficult to reconcile with Enlightenment positions. These works include the aptly titled *Euphémie, ou le triomphe de la religion* (1768), the *Mémoires d'Euphémie* of the same year, and *Ermançe*, published in the *Epreuves du sentiment* in 1775. *Euphémie*, for instance, is faced with a choice between her former love for Sinval and her vows to the monastic institution, and the title of the play tells us the direction which she finally chooses. Texts such as this dramatise the conflict between the experiential truth of the heart and religious duty, with the latter winning out in terms of the binary choices which the text presents. Moreover, in the 'Précis de l'histoire de la Trappe' published in conjunction with *Les Amants malheureux*, Baculard offers an apology for the monastic way of life, considered as a necessary recourse for those whose lives have led them into dissolution and disorder which require remedy. All this seems very far removed from the militant anti-monasticism of Voltaire and Diderot, and the analysis of François Vernes's *Mathilde au Mont-Carmel* will demonstrate later how a more radical reading of the political meaning of such narratives can be made within the sentimental tradition of the period. Yet I would still wish to press the continuities rather than the dichotomies. In Baculard's narratives, the imperative of renunciation operates, almost by definition, as one pole in an opposition, the other pole being the 'natural' promptings of the human heart which the sentimental text typically places at the centre of its preoccupations. If *Euphémie* sacrifices her love, then one function of that sacrifice is to throw into sharper relief the magnitude of the happiness which is being renounced: in a discursive movement which may be described either as circularity or as a repeated oscillation between two poles, the projected (and remembered) happiness only seems to remind the heroine of the sacrifice she has made. Despite the apparently programmatic nature of the plot as it opts for renunciation over fulfilment, sentimental plenitude remains the discursive centre of the text: but it seems that this plenitude remains at one remove from the moment of enunciation, the text seeking to circumscribe and hold it, but