# *Introduction: collective sympathy*

> The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as their virtues. The propensity to society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and sentiments to run, as it were by contagion, thro' the whole club or knot of companions … If we run over the whole globe or revolve all the annals of history, we shall discover everywhere signs of this sympathy or contagion of manners.
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> David Hume, 'Of National Characters' (1748)[1]

> Many a man has been drawn, by the contagion of sympathy with his own class acting as a mob, into outrages of destruction or spoliation, such as he could never have contemplated with toleration in his solitary hours.
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> Thomas De Quincey, 'Conservative Prospects' (March 1841)[2]

This study makes the case that during the Romantic period, sympathy was understood as a disruptive social phenomenon which functioned to spread disorder and unrest between individuals and even across nations like a 'contagion'. It thus formed a crucial element of Romantic engagement with the crowd. In the opening statements, moral philosopher David Hume (1711–76) and essayist Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859) note the key qualities of sympathy with which this book will engage. Though published almost a century apart, the continuities between the two accounts are striking. Both Hume and De Quincey acknowledge the social and even political effects of the indiscriminate transmission of energies and emotions enabled by sympathy. Both assert that sympathy is not just an individualised phenomenon but a collective one which enables communication within groups ranging in size from intimate fellowships to 'the whole globe'. But strikingly, though both Hume and De Quincey remark on the powerful influence of sympathy on social communication, neither

seems able to offer an explanation for its operation. Taking Hume's and De Quincey's accounts as representative of a particular form of discussion about collective action, this book explores the ways in which, from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century, sympathy is understood as enabling collective, contagious and inexplicable forms of communication. These 100 years span the period we have come to associate with Romantic literary expression. Though my account of sympathy and the crowd takes as its object scientific, philosophical and political rather than purely literary works, such periodisation is important for this study, because during this era sympathy assumes uniquely contested political significance, as it comes to be associated with both riotous political protest and the diffusion of information through the press.

Despite the striking continuities between Hume's and De Quincey's interpretations of sympathetic communication, the distinctions between them are even more important. These distinctions demonstrate the evolution of understandings of collective sympathy during the 100-year period between the publication of the two accounts. While Hume displays an indulgent attitude towards the 'contagion' of sympathetic communication, De Quincey condemns sympathy for enabling the mindless actions of the 'mob'. The contrast between these accounts of sympathy is shaped in part by the publishing context and formal concerns of the texts in which they appear. Hume's statement is taken from an essay published in 1748, but written for a genteel readership of individuals known to the author. The intimate scale of Hume's imagined audience has the implicit effect of restricting the notion of the collective under discussion in the essay. For Hume, though sympathy enables the spread of particular 'manners' through a collective, this collective is imagined as a 'club or knot of companions'. Hume asserts that this phenomenon is universal, repeated across the globe and throughout history, but in each case, sympathy is assumed to operate only in polite society or small social circles within it. Hume therefore asserts that though it has potentially coercive effects, sympathy is essentially an ethical force which proves a productive object of study in the exploration of the essential qualities of human nature. By contrast, De Quincey's definition is taken from a piece of partisan journalism, written for a national audience of magazine readers. De Quincey is explicitly concerned with the threat of popular uprising, and in the face of imminent social and political reform, he makes sympathy the agent of crowd violence, and by extension, of democratic political participation. In this context, Hume's 'knot of companions' is reimagined as a faceless and mindless 'mob', and sympathy becomes the

pathological medium of unrest. We see a clear shift in tone from Hume's companionable, inclusive rhetoric to De Quincey's exclusionary description of a 'mob' which must be viewed and examined from a safe distance. Hume's and De Quincey's contrasting accounts of collective action have important implications for our understanding of sympathy as an index of social and political configuration during the Romantic period. While in 1748 sympathy can be claimed to enable genteel communication, by 1841 it is a medium for democratic levelling principles.

The contrast between Hume's and De Quincey's interpretations of sympathetic communication suggest the way in which such responses are themselves a product of changes in social, political and even technological structures over the course of the intervening century. Though sympathy is characterised in both accounts as a contagious property whereby influence and ideas are transmitted across a collective, the political valence of such transmission is entirely altered. Whereas sympathy for Hume enables companionship, for De Quincey it is the medium of riot and disorder. However, De Quincey's later account of sympathy does not displace or invalidate Hume's earlier one. The accepted meaning of sympathetic communication does not simply shift, over the course of this period, from an index of polite sociability to a medium of collective unrest. As this study will demonstrate, sympathetic communication proves remarkably resistant to categorisation of any kind, and certainly cannot be assigned any consistent ideological qualities. Sympathy is not a passion, a feeling or an opinion in its own right, but rather, as the language of 'contagion' suggests, a medium for the transmission of energies, ideas and emotions within a collective.[3] Hume's definition of sympathetic communication retains its significance throughout the period under discussion, because sympathetic communication assumes distinct applications in particular social and political contexts over the course of those 100 years.

The significance of sympathy in eighteenth-century thought as an index of both emotional and social fellow feeling has been the subject of sustained critical interest.[4] But though critics of eighteenth-century and Romantic literature and culture have noted the peculiarly protean nature of sympathy, its significance for crowd behaviour has tended to go unacknowledged. Sympathy has most commonly been understood as a catalyst of the poetic imagination or the imaginative connection between writer and reader.[5] This study argues, by contrast, that at this period sympathy is understood as a medium of emotions and ideas, and that sympathetic communication is implicated in a range of accounts of the actions of collectives, from intimate clubs, to political crowds, to nations. By the end of the eighteenth

century, sympathy is understood as collective, instinctive and inexplicable, and the political threat of the affective communication it enables becomes explicit. The marked alteration in responses to collective sympathy that we see in the contrast between Hume's and De Quincey's explanations can be read as, at least in part, a response by British commentators to the actions of revolutionary collectives in France. As I discuss in Chapter 1, several accounts of sympathy in the second half of the eighteenth century note the potential for collective sympathy to cause social and political disruption, but like Hume, their authors tend to describe such disruptive potential in generous, even complacent, terms as a curiosity of human nature. But in the aftermath of the French Revolution, such collective sympathetic communication is viewed not as a curiosity but as a threat. This study takes as its focus accounts of sympathy produced between 1790 and 1830, the period still described by literary scholars as Romantic.[6] I readily acknowledge the futility of attempting any exhaustive taxonomy of the characteristics either of sympathy or of 'Romantic' literary discourse. And yet this study will make the case that accounts of sympathy produced during the Romantic period constitute a particular development of earlier philosophical assertions of the social operation of sympathy, thereby producing an understanding of crowd behaviour which is peculiar to the historical moment succeeding the French Revolution.

This book explores representations of the operation of sympathetic communication in various contexts over the course of the Romantic period. Collective sympathy operates as a medium not only of emotions but also of opinions and ideas, and therefore, at moments of political crisis or unrest, it assumes explicit and highly contested political significance in a wide range of discourses. The four long chapters in this book present a series of case studies which examine the representation of communicative sympathy in various contexts, detailing the ways in which, over the course of the period, sympathy is understood as the catalyst for the unruly behaviour of political crowds, but is also increasingly associated with the diffusion of information through the press. Part I of the book, comprising Chapters 1 and 2, addresses the politicisation of sympathy in the late eighteenth century, and Chapters 3 and 4, which make up Part II, assess the enduring significance of such models into the early nineteenth century. These analyses combine to present a cumulative account of the evolution of understandings of sympathy in Romantic literary, political, philosophical and scientific discourses, and its significance for our understanding of acts of political communication and democratic participation in the period as a whole.

In Chapter 1 I survey the eighteenth-century philosophical context for Romantic representations of sympathetic communication in crowds, examining the connections between moral philosophical models of sympathy and analyses of the term in the medical sciences and in folk traditions. These diverse studies are connected by a conviction that sympathy is a social phenomenon rather than a purely ethical principle, but their conception of the social function of sympathy varies widely. Analyses of sympathetic interaction form a fundamental element of the moral philosophical writings of Hume and Adam Smith (1723–90). Each claims sympathy as the guarantee of the ethical nature of social interaction, but the models of sympathy they propose also suggest that sympathy does not just operate within polite social circles, but applies across a range of social collectives. For Hume, sympathy is not an ethical or social virtue in its own right, but a medium of communication for all the passions. Smith, by contrast, despite his focus on the imaginative faculties, stresses the regulative, evaluative qualities of sympathy, which are enabled by individual judgement. Critical analyses of the social application of Hume and Smith's models of sympathy generally present sympathy as a cohesive social force, but sympathy clearly carries with it the threat of unrest and resists direct application to any single form of social theory.

The disruptive qualities of sympathy implied even in the work of Hume and Smith arise out of a quality of the term their writings tend to obscure. Sympathy is associated with physiological communication at this period, in particular the operation of the nerves. I investigate eighteenth-century medical models of the nervous system which demonstrate that while nervous action is not clearly understood, it is often associated with folklore and even occult discourse. Sympathy retains these occult associations even in systematic empirical attempts to explain its operation, such as the work of Robert Whytt (1714–66). Whytt's research, published over a fifteen-year period which spans the first appearance of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), produces the disturbing conclusion that sympathy is a dynamic medium of communication within the body, whereby disorder in one part is instantaneously connected with the next, but that it also enables the transmission of disorder between individuals. This understanding of sympathy is vital to explaining the discomfort suggested in the work of Hume and Smith. Collective sympathy disrupts understandings of autonomous, unitary selfhood, and breaks down distinctions between empirical and speculative enquiry. But, more important, sympathetic communication does not just operate within polite groupings, but in a whole range of collectives. At moments of unrest the unruly nature

of sympathetic communication acquires explicitly political significance. The actions of the crowd in the Wilkesite uprisings of the late 1760s, for example, are characterised as a product of collective physiological sympathetic transmission.

I end this chapter by suggesting that British responses to the events of the French Revolution make explicit the political implications of sympathy which before 1789 were only latent. This shift is illustrated in the changing character of Edmund Burke's (1729–97) engagement with sympathy over the course of his long career. In 1770 Burke uses a language of physiological sympathy to characterise the actions of John Wilkes's (1725–97) followers. Despite his concerns about unruly collective action, Burke advocates sympathy as a cohesive social force. By 1790, when Burke produces his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, such a generous response is unthinkable. Though the Wilkesite uprisings suggest the political significance of sympathetic communication, sympathy is not consistently associated with unruly collective action until the end of the eighteenth century. The actions of the crowd during the Gordon Riots of 1780, for example, are not described in terms of sympathy, and Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) can still claim sympathy as a cohesive social force in the 1780s. The actions of revolutionary crowds demonstrate the political threat of collective sympathy, but the revolution also reveals broader applications of this model of sympathetic communication. As I discuss in Chapter 1, in accounts of sympathy produced after 1790, it becomes a model for the diffusion of information through the press. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, Hume and Smith's model of cohesive social sympathy seems utterly transformed.[7] However, Romantic models of collective sympathy retain important connections with their eighteenth-century philosophical antecedents. Smith's attempts to regulate sympathetic exchange assume particular importance in this revolutionary context, and responses to his work constitute a recurring feature of this study.

Chapter 2 assesses the ways in which, after the French Revolution, the latent anxieties regarding the sympathetic transmission of feelings within a collective acquire new political significance. In the face of the vastly increased visibility and influence of crowds, commentators look for a means to describe and account for such behaviour, and the implicit analogy between physiological sympathetic communication and collective action becomes explicit. However, the obscurity at the root of such models of sympathy endures. Though for most commentators the connection between physiological sympathy and sympathetic communication in a crowd is figurative, the suggestion remains that a physical transmission

is actually taking place. I describe the responses to the politicisation of sympathy in the work of Burke, Helen Maria Williams (1761/2–1827), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), William Godwin (1753–1836) and John Thelwall (1764–1834). All these writers account for the communication of revolutionary fervour, ideology and unrest through the use of a language of quasi-physiological sympathy. Each represents the operation of sympathy in revolutionary crowds as instantaneous, instinctive, far-reaching and obscure. As a result, all struggle to describe the political effects of such action in positive terms. Anxieties about crowd behaviour dominate these discussions of sympathy, and even tend to override the particular ideological position of each commentator. An implicit element of this common discomfort about collective action is a broader anxiety about democratic politics, which is evident even in the work of reformist writers. For all these commentators, the behaviour of crowds is taken as a paradigm for the populace at large, so reformers strive to rehabilitate and even to celebrate the sympathetic communication that enables such collective action. Of the writers under discussion only Thelwall manages such rehabilitation, because, rather than try to overwrite or resist the physiological implications of sympathetic transmission, he analyses and engages with them. The work under discussion in this chapter is characterised by an abstracting movement from descriptions of a physical crowd to accounts of communication throughout the nation. For Burke this is a sign of the potentially apocalyptic scale of the revolutionary energies he describes, but for Williams, Wollstonecraft, Godwin and Thelwall, this abstracting movement constitutes a means of associating sympathetic communication with enlightenment and progress rather than with the potentially atavistic instincts of a crowd. These reformist writers thus tend to associate sympathy with other media of communication, in particular the diffusion of information through the press.

Despite the vastly transformed discursive context in which they are writing, these commentators' political analyses of collective sympathy are informed by epistemological and ethical questions inherited from an earlier moral philosophical context. My examination focusses on two contrasting problems raised by the politicisation of sympathetic communication: the potential corruption of emotional models of sympathy which arise out of a sentimental tradition, and the challenge to paradigms of rational control presented by sympathy's instinctive qualities. Both Burke and Williams respond to the transformation of sentimental accounts of sympathy in this revolutionary context. Emotional models are encroached upon and transformed by the physiological basis of collective sympathy.

For Burke the influence of physiological interpretations of sympathy is a disastrous corruption of sympathetic relations, but for Williams it has the positive effect of explaining and even rationalising the behaviour of revolutionary crowds. For Wollstonecraft and Godwin, by contrast, collective sympathy raises the spectre of mass instinctive action, which contravenes the control of reason. Both writers face the serious problem that their distrust of collective sympathy compromises any practical application of their support for political reform, though for Wollstonecraft the diffusion of information through the press proves a possible solution to this bind. I end with an account of Thelwall's determination to explain and to rationalise sympathetic communication, and his development of a model of collective sympathy which not only informs his ideal of the diffusion of political information, but justifies his political practice by rationalising and even celebrating the practice of political oratory. Thelwall's celebration of sympathetic communication is an extremely unusual one, however, and accounts of sympathy produced at this moment seem to reach a consensus that the unregulated actions of the crowd may prove an insuperable obstacle to enlightenment and reform.

In Part II of the book, I assess representations of sympathetic communication in the early part of the nineteenth century. I claim that not only is sympathy still considered a valid term to describe political communication at this moment, but also that commentators working in a range of genres make a concerted attempt to rehabilitate sympathetic communication and to remove it from its damaging associations with the actions of crowds. In Chapter 3 I assess the significance of the language of sympathy in the struggle for political reform in collective protest and in the press during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Sympathy assumed increasing importance in discussions of the press in the 1790s, and in the 1810s this process was intensified. I focus on the way in which sympathy is aligned with the diffusion of information through the press, and analyse accounts of sympathy in political journalism itself. The political journalism of William Hazlitt (1778–1830) displays a similar focus to the work of the reformist writers discussed in Chapter 2. Hazlitt engages with the moral philosophical heritage of understandings of sympathy, and worries that collective sympathy is a threat to individual autonomy. His account of the operation of sympathy in political crowds also indicates real anxiety about the efficacy of democratic political representation. Hazlitt writes to defend the principle of unlimited political expression, but cannot countenance the political effects of collective sympathy, which leaves no place for reasoned argument or for sentiment. However, Hazlitt's discussion of

sympathy also demonstrates an evolution in understandings of the term since the 1790s. In the 1810s, unregulated sympathetic communication is evoked less frequently as a medium of emotions in a physical crowd and is increasingly claimed as a figure for much broader systems of communication. In contrast to Hazlitt's focus on the unruly crowd, writers in a newly emergent cheap radical press present sympathy as a figure for the circulation of information through that press, and describe the cohesive effects of such circulation in terms of sympathy. Sympathy is thus claimed in the cheap radical press as an agent of enlightenment and progress, and implicitly, of democratic reform.

The writings of journalists in the cheap radical press in the 1810s enable a new interpretation of the political effects of collective sympathy, and a strong divide opens up between the respectable and popular press at this moment. Whereas in the 1790s collective sympathy presented a serious problem for reformist commentators, in the cheap radical press it is invoked as a defence against critiques of crowd behaviour. In representations of collective action in which the language of sympathy is absent, such action is condemned. This is illustrated in responses to the Spa Fields unrest in London in 1816, where collective behaviour is dismissed by both conservatives and reformers in the respectable press as instinctive riot. There are no attempts to analyse the mechanisms of collective action, beyond suggesting its pathological qualities, and accounts of the crowd descend into critiques of its essential atavism. But between 1816 and 1819 the boisterous cheap radical press reimagines both collective action and collective sympathy, even adopting a language of sympathy to describe its political practice and aims. William Cobbett (1763–1835) and William Hone (1780–1842) in particular re-engage with the discourse of sympathy which seemed to have fallen out of use, stressing that sympathy is both a symbol of political solidarity and a dynamic medium of communication. After the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 the language of sympathy becomes highly visible, but sympathy is not just cited as an index of pity. Rather, sympathy's physiological properties are evoked as figures for both the implicit threat of physical confrontation posed by mass protest and for the broad transmission of political information. In contrast to earlier characterisations of the press, the radical press is now celebrated as a medium of both rational information and emotional energies, and is described using the language of physiological sympathy. The cheap radical press challenges essentialist models of collective action by publishing verbatim accounts of political meetings which characterise the crowd as boisterous but rational. Most important, broader models of periodical

circulation described in these texts enable the characterisation of the nation as one body, unified by collective, sympathetic bonds of purpose. They champion a plan for nationwide simultaneous meetings designed to constitute a literal representation of the virtual collectives enabled by the press and to actualise the bonds of fellow feeling the press has generated. Such activity is effectively destroyed by the Six Acts of 1819, but for a brief moment the cheap radical press demonstrates that sympathy could be claimed not only as the transmitter of emotion within a physical crowd, but as a much broader medium of political information and bonds of solidarity through the nation at large.

Over the course of the Romantic period, sympathy becomes more often associated with the press than with the physical crowd, which seems to suggest that textual protest rather than collective assembly is increasingly considered the more powerful agent of reform. However, characterisations of the press and of the crowd remain intimately connected and continue to share a language of sympathy. The cheap radical press of the 1810s demonstrated that sympathetic communication could be appropriated for a particular political cause, but in that case sympathy was still strongly associated with the politically illegitimate popular struggle for democratic reform. However, collective sympathy is not always characterised as a disruptive force at this period. I close this study with a consideration of two contrasting attempts to reclaim sympathy as an agent of patriotic spirit. Chapter 4 analyses representations of sympathy in genres which are not ostensibly polemical, namely moral philosophy, the familiar essay and genre painting. However, their accounts of sympathy retain important political implications.

The chapter examines the writings of Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), which demonstrate the extent to which the moral philosophical models of sympathy of the Scottish enlightenment maintain their influence even in the polemical Romantic public sphere. Stewart adapts the philosophical model of his antecedents to address the political issues of popular representation and democratic reform. Stewart's career spans a thirty-six-year period (1792–1828), and his analysis of sympathy constitutes an extended response to and commentary on the various attempts to characterise sympathy over the course of this study, from Hume to Hone. Even in the first volume of his *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, published in 1792 in an atmosphere of political reaction, Stewart identifies himself as an advocate of reform and celebrates the transformative power of the diffusion of political information through the press. Stewart asserts his reformist position within a detailed analysis of 'imitative sympathy', and,