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Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution

In Literary Style

(Oxford UP 1998) = 1-9, 13-23,

137-142,

151-173.

Introduction

Fraser's account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory; it makes these views look like errors. . . . But it will never be plausible to say that mankind does all that out of sheer stupidity.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*

The words 'sensibility' and 'sentiment' name a momentous cultural shift whose terms were defined in the eighteenth century. The event all but founded the novel, and it produced an upheaval in the way poetry was conceived and written. Both romanticism and modernism organized themselves in relation to the traditions of sensibility and sentiment.

So far as high culture is concerned, however, these traditions remain something of an embarrassment—at best a topic of academic interest, at worst a perceived threat to the practice of art.

The understanding of poetry has suffered most from the situation. This happened because the twentieth-century critique of the sentimental tradition focused on poetry. The scholastic success of this critique not only disappeared a large corpus of vital and important poetry, it obscured the conventions that supported such poetry. The twentieth-century reader's access to this kind of writing was short-circuited from the start.

This book is therefore an attempt to recover a somewhat lost world. My point of departure is institutional modernism, which ordered the academic horizon of writing for most of the twentieth-century and spent much of its energy fighting against the poetic styles I will be examining. The central figure in that campaign was T. S. Eliot, whose defence of a classical tradition, as he saw it, entailed a corresponding assault upon the new and decidedly anti-classical styles of poetry founded in the eighteenth century.

But Eliot was not alone. The antipathy to 'sentimental' styles went broadcast. Of the imposing modernist writers, only Gertrude Stein kept perfect faith with this line of work.

Literary history has represented this story as the struggle of modernism against romanticism. The latter was viewed—in some respects correctly—as an advanced state of sentimentalism. That version of events quickly proved intolerable, however, and today it is a scholastic commonplace that modernism draws upon romanticism in fundamental ways.

Which of course it does. But when later twentieth-century scholars reconstructed that relationship, they also worked to preserve the classicist approach to reading and writing. To the extent that criticism has managed to incorporate romanticism into the (classicist) idea of 'tradition', it has continued to obscure the naive-and-sentimental heritage bequeathed to all later culture by the eighteenth century. The acts of incorporation were executed by reading romanticism through its most conservative venues, where 'the balance and reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities' would be emphasized. Roads of excess were roads not taken, and that has made all the difference.

Along with this selective reading of the past went a carefully censored version of modernism itself. Because the moving spirit remained classical, the literary histories that emerged tended to emphasize the continuities pursued by a classicist ideology rather than the contradictions it generated. So we were directed by works that bore titles like *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. This general approach to reading and writing established its authority in the schools, which continue to rediscover, or reconstruct, new orderly (conceptualized) arrangements for our imaginative inheritance. And all this takes place even though we know very well, or profess to know, that writing—if it is alive—always resists such arrangements. (To appreciate the vitality of modernist writing—including the writing of Eliot—we do best to approach it through its internal conflicts and contradictions. In this way writing has a chance to survive the critical abstractions we bring to elucidate it.)

The poetry of sentiment and sensibility is relevant here for two reasons. First, it was (paradoxically) 'the deepest if not the most attractive legacy of the Age of Reason' (Hagstrum, 1980: 277). Second, the resistance to such writing was raised from the beginning by eighteenth-century classicist figures, and the hostility grew as the resources of sensibility developed and spread.

'Sensibility' was an equivocal condition even for those who gave their hearts to it. Eliot, like Pope in the eighteenth century, was both a great poet and a commanding cultural presence. He was also, like Pope and Johnson, a reactionary figure haunted with premonitory dreams of cultural Armageddon. This dark future cast its shadow across the presence of Pope and Johnson, on one hand, and of Eliot and Pound on the other. In the eighteenth century the shadows were legion—its names are Gray, Macpherson, the Della Crusceans, and a mob of scribbling women.

Eliot named the shadow Gertrude Stein, as we see from the review he wrote in January 1927 for *The Nation & Athenaeum*. The four books under review include Stein's *Composition as Explanation*, recently published (November 1926) by Hogarth Press. The books provoke Eliot to comment upon 'the future' of writing, of language, of art; in particular, the future (or futures) that may be thought to lie within the cultural upheaval that had begun some fifteen or twenty years earlier.

Eliot is not happy with the future he sees forecast in the books he is reviewing. One of them, John Rodker's *The Future of Futurism* (1926), imagines an epoch dominated by two kinds of writing: on one hand, 'a pantheon of super-Mallarmés for a smaller and smaller public', and on the other 'a completely Americanized' and 'popular literature' (Eliot, 1927: 595). Confronted with the example of Stein, however, Eliot sees no 'warrant for believing [with Rodker] that our sensibility will become more "complex" and "refined", when that new day comes. For Eliot, the future according to Stein is 'precisely ominous' of 'a future . . . more simple and . . . more crude than that of the present'. Eliot ends his review in no uncertain terms:

her work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is of the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested. (Eliot, 1927: 595)

In fact, Stein's hypnotic rhythms trace themselves back to the eighteenth century, when poetic writing began to explore the languages of the 'feelings' and the 'heart'—languages that

sought to expand their expressive range by developing their non-semantic and transconceptual resources. Eliot understood this kind of writing—witness his essay on Swinburne—but he deplored it and the future it promised.¹ As it turned out, institutional modernism managed to exorcise its most demonic spirit. Swept out of the schools, Stein and seven other devils went elsewhere, and perhaps 'the last state of that man became worse than the first'. We now call that state 'postmodernism'.

The internal conflicts of modernism, the many (celebrated or deplored) postmodernisms, and the 'future' of poetic writing in which we might be interested: these subjects call us to return to the eighteenth century, and in particular to reconsider carefully the poetry of the 'feeling heart', the *cœur sensible*. We tend not to 'read' this poetry, we have tended not to do so for almost one hundred years. But it seems to me that we don't 'read' it because we think we already know it. So we pre-read it instead, if we turn to it at all, or we mine it for information. But the writing as such remains largely unencountered.

My approach here is different. I take it for granted that the poetics of sentiment and sensibility—not, as we shall see, *exactly* the same thing—operate within determinate rhetorical conventions. In this respect they function like any poetic style—like *stil novisti* writing, for example, or metaphysical verse. I also assume that adequate reading begins (though it will not end) by entering into those conventions, by reading in the same spirit that the author writ. To do this requires a considerable effort of sympathetic identification: considerable, because (a) we have been taught for so long to *unread* this kind of writing, and (b) because the writing itself is difficult, often in fact a kind of anti-writing. Its touchstone moments involve failure as well as a discourse of apparently non-articulate (or at any rate non-rational) communication.

My judgement (or my guess) is that recent work in 'Cultural Studies' and especially feminist criticism has called for a work of this kind. That scholarship helped to acquaint us with the nighwood of lost or forgotten writing and has been a salutary event. A less happy consequence of such work, as I read it, is a

¹ It is important to remember that Eliot wrote this essay in 1920, and that he included it in his *Selected Essays* (1932). The essay is one of the central documents in his argument for literary and cultural change.

tendency to evade the question of the aesthetic character and value of the obscured texts; or, if those questions are addressed, to look for value in the moral qualities that can be found in the works. But the power and value of art may have nothing as such to do with morality. Art functions as representation—reflection—and as revelation. Its office is to show and tell, nothing more is required. Part of what it may show and tell are moral realities, but in so far as these come in the form of art, they come as representations and revelations, not as ethical standards or even models. Not many would (now) regard Dante's *Inferno* as an ethical standard. It is a vision of hell through and through, a work far more terrible (and wonderful) than the notorious demonic visions of our contemporary Kathy Acker. And it is worse (and better), we now would probably say, exactly because its horrors are a function of its ethics (as one sees from the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, which are also engendered by those ethics).

But we custodians of culture are continually, *professionally* inclined to imagine that art ought to deliver the best that has been known and thought in the world, and—what is worse—to think of this 'best' as a moral category. The tendency produces grotesque results for anyone interested in promoting the practice of art and imagination. Of course there will always be a waxing and waning of readers' interests, however much other readers at the same time may deplore those fluctuations. The problem that concerns me, however, and that led me to write this book, is not change or stasis in the canon of what we read. It is the tendency to approach all art, canonical or non-canonical, in rational—in theoretical and philosophical—terms. Theory and method are essential to criticism, but they must be secondary frames of reference: tools picked up to help clarify (for readers) less mediated perceptual encounters (affect at all levels); and to help organize (for writers) the rhetoric of their works.

The poetics of sensibility and sentiment are especially apt for the purposes I am sketching here. They brought a revolution to poetic style exactly by arguing—by 'showing and telling'—that the traditional view of mind and reason would no longer serve a truly reasonable—in eighteenth-century terms, a *sensible*—mind. These poetics, along with the other literatures of sensibility and sentiment, worked their revolution by developing new

and non-traditional modes of expression—styles that were the dress of their new thoughts. These new thoughts, whose (western) roots are in ancient sceptical philosophy, assume that no human action of any consequence is possible—including 'mental' action—that is not led and driven by feeling, affect, emotion. Rationalist philosophies, which neglect these matters, incline to treat language as a conceptual vehicle and semantic structure. The new Lockean approach to 'ideas', which saw them as (literally) sensational forms, radically altered the entire cultural terrain. The revolution in philosophy that ensued was accompanied by a revolution in linguistic practice and theory. True to the character of the change involved here, this linguistic revolution was carried out as a *rhetorical and stylistic event*, as a set of writing practices and conventions.

We know these best—that is, they have been most thoroughly studied—in the novels and plays of the period. The specifically poetical styles of sensibility and the sentimental, however, have been neglected. There are historical reasons for this neglect, as I have already suggested. However that may be, special needs urge one to study the poetry (rather than, say, the fiction) of sensibility, and in particular the lyric poetry, or those verse forms that emphasize expressive structure. One is tactical: twentieth-century pedagogy set the lyric as the model of poetic form, and in so doing directed its polemic squarely against the new styles founded in the eighteenth century. Our loss of reading skills is a direct function of this situation. The other reason is strategic. Poetry (unlike fiction) forces one to attend to 'the word as such'. It foregrounds the physique of lexical and grammatical fields, it approaches all aspects of the language, including the signifieds and the referents, as if they were signifying forms. Consequently, studying the poetries of sensibility and sentiment gives one a specially clear view of how a language of affective meanings—of how language as affective thought—functions.

Such, at any rate, is the conviction driving this study.

* * *

I die because I cannot die.

St Teresa

As we know, tears are the proper emblem of the literatures of sensibility and sentiment. They mark out a special population who live and move and have their being by affect, through sympathy: men and women of sorrow who are acquainted with grief—responding to it in others, suffering it themselves. Other emblems—blushes, involuntary sighs, swooning, a rapid pulse—expand one's sense of the experience being explored through these literatures. The expansion is a dominantly erotic one, as the touchstone fictions produced by this movement show: *Clarissa*, *A Sentimental Journey*, *La nouvelle Heloise*, *Werther*, *Paul et Virginie*. In this kind of writing, the body's elementary and spontaneous mechanisms come to measure persons themselves as well as their social relations.

To mete that measure, the 'Age of Reason' brought forth a new, a complex, and a decidedly non-rational constellation of artistic styles. Through it all, tears and a mode of elegiac lament recur and dominate. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, that Knowledge increaseth Sorrow, centres the imaginations of sensibility and sentiment, which made an important addition to that wisdom by reversing its terms.

But the theme of loss dominates, it does not exhaust, this body of writing, as we shall see. The logic and grammar of its discourse are by no means grounded in elegy or an elegiac style, however characteristic they may be of the poetries of sentiment and sensibility. I therefore postpone the topic of elegiac writing—it comes in Part III—in order to open my subject along a rather more traditional literary-historical line.

Part I recuperates some of the basic terms needed for a study of this kind, both intellectual and stylistic. Parts II and III then consider the poetries of sensibility and of sentiment, respectively. Although the two styles bleed into each other and cannot always be clearly distinguished, we want to try to see their differences. This book argues that the discourse of sensibility is the ground on which the discourse of sentiment gets built. In terms of the crucial mind/body diad that shaped the original philosophical discussions, sensibility emphasizes the mind in the body, sentimentality the body in the mind. The distinction is a rough one, but it corresponds to discernible features of writing and cultural attitude. The fact that sentimental writing overtakes and subsumes the discourse of sensibility between

1740 and 1840 is important to remember, as are the gender issues that come to structure much of this writing. Lockean thought materialized various spectres for 'the culture of sensibility',² 'Unsex'd Females' being the worst of all.³ As the discourse of sentimentality evolved, it re-established at least the appearance of traditional hierarchies of thought (religious v. secular) and social relations (male v. female).

Those large cultural issues move at the periphery of this book, however, which is, as I have said, a book about writing and poetry, not a book about culture and ideas. (Or it is the latter only to the extent that the (mis)understanding of poetry might be judged, in our contemporary frame of reference, a serious moral and cultural problem.) All three parts of the study focus on particular writers and particular texts. Parts II and III begin with readings that sketch out the basic moves of a poetry of sensibility and a poetry of sentiment. They conclude with specific, self-contained studies of certain salient writers or bodies of writing.

I should explain that my decision to develop critical 'readings' of specific texts comprises an integral part of my critique of the academic legacy of modernism. New Criticism founded itself in a pedagogy of poetic interpretation whose centre-piece was the focused 'reading' of poems. The method explicitly dissociated the interpretable content of a poem from the (subjective) sensibility that engendered the work. Famous New Critical protocols like the Intentional and the Affective Fallacies in effect forbade the critical deployment of the stylistic conventions of sensibility and sentimentality. As a consequence, entire orders of poetical writing went virtually unread; or when certain texts from those orders *were* engaged—Keats is here the exemplary case—their most characteristic features slipped in a moment out of their poetic life. In this book, then, I have felt it important to show that 'close reading' can escape the myopias suffered and promoted by the movement most responsible for the evanishment of the poetics of sensibility and sentiment.

² The phrase alludes to G. J. Barker-Benfield's useful study *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³ This is the title of Richard Polwhele's 1798 poetical critique of contemporary women writers, especially those associated with 'liberal' thought (what the critics of such thought called 'jacobin').

None the less, the book relegates its conceptually 'finished' forms of presentation to subordinate critical positions. There are integral studies of particular writers, or groups of writers, or individual works, and there are also highly structured presentations of certain intellectual and stylistic 'lines'. Most of these critical units focus on individual works and their local stylistic features: they are what Walter Pater would have called 'appreciations'. They are also loosely organized in relation to each other in order to mitigate the appearance of general completion. In this case my own knowledge could not pretend to such, but—in any case—I disbelieve in that kind of completeness, which finally encourages a conceptual and abstract approach to poetic materials.

It is not just that knowledge and understanding undergo constant change. More particularly, our knowledge and understanding of *poetry* ought to hold itself in a condition of fear and trembling. The mind's will to intellectual adequacy is irresistible: hence the need, in studying works of imagination, to resist final representations of that will. A rule of incommensurability must somehow be built into every critical approach to poetry if the criticism has any hope of meeting the work on its own terms.

Such, at any rate, is another conviction driving this study.