What Is Sentimentality?

June Howard

People talk about sentimentality quite a lot. And they seem to know what they are talking about. The category has had an especially long-standing, conspicuous role in American literary history, and it appears more frequently than ever in current criticism. Cultural studies has foregrounded the way in which we *live* social relations, the inextricable entanglements of subjectivity and power; it is not surprising that sentiment's articulations of feeling and form seem more and more interesting. The term is so charged and pervasive, so plastic, precisely because our reactions to sentimentality are so deeply rooted in our ways of organizing the relation of self and world. I believe that scholarly usages of "sentimentality" are more closely intertwined with everyday meanings of the term than we usually recognize, that they often rely on unexamined and untenable assumptions about the nature of emotion, and that intermittent slides into condemnation or celebration undermine their analytic value.

We need to move on from arguments for and against sentimentality to the task of conceptualizing it as a transdisciplinary object of study. In what follows I discuss investigations of emotions and social life by scholars working separately in fields ranging from neurobiology to anthropology to history. I argue that current work outside the boundary of the humanities can usefully revise our perspective on emotion itself; that the link between sentiment and eighteenth-century notions of sympathy and sensibility should be reclaimed; and that we should make a systematic distinction between sentiment and nineteenth-century domestic ideology, and reconstruct the history of their imbrication.

Many readers will agree that it is time for American literary historians to vacate, once and for all, the discourse of judgment that has characterized so much work on sentimentality. The terms of what Laura Wexler calls the "Douglas-Tompkins debate" (9) are familiar: do the popular novels published by women in the mid nineteenth century represent, as argued by Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), a fall from tough-minded, community-oriented Calvinism into "rancid," individualistic emotionalism, the beginnings of a debased mass

consumer culture that has swallowed up what was most valuable in American literature and thought (256)? Or do they constitute, as argued by Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (1985), a complex and effective affirmation of women's power, a grass roots antipatriarchal politics? Douglas and Tompkins both take sentimentality seriously, as do critics following them who have also treated it as culturally powerful and historically resonant. Wexler goes on from her discussion of the critical tradition to analysis of the cultural work of domestic fiction in terms of race as well as gender and class. Richard Brodhead adds a new dimension with his reading of the now-classic novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner as key documents of a middle-class regime of socialization through coercive love that he calls "disciplinary intimacy." Karen Sánchez-Eppler places women's antislavery fiction in rhetorical and political context and produces a striking account of its phenomenology, which I will draw on later. "Reading sentimental fiction is," she writes, "a bodily act," and the way words produce "pulse beats and sobs . . . . radically contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, as the feelings in the story are made tangibly present in the flesh of the reader. . . . [T]ears designate a border realm between the story and its reading, since the tears shed by characters initiate an answering moistness in the reader's eye" (100).

Shirley Samuels's collection *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992) embodies the richness of the work produced by the contest of interpretations over sentimentality. The volume's profusion of uncollated claims also, however, demonstrates the difficulty of the field. And its contributors, particularly the literary critics, relapse with some regularity into the terms of the Douglas-Tompkins debate. Here and elsewhere, essays still argue the question of whether the form is complicit with or subversive of dominant ideology; even the plausible suggestion that it might be both is a maneuver within received perspectives. Judith Fetterley's 1994 warning that the historicizing turn may be another way of marginalizing nineteenth-century women's writing at once observes and demonstrates the persistence of the debate: "I am struck by what I see as an asymmetry in certain recent work, the disproportionately negative as opposed to positive assessment of these writers. *The Culture of Sentiment,* for example, . . . noteworthy for the seriousness of attention and engagement it represents, includes a number of essays that seek to present 'sentimentalism' as a complex mixture of positive and negative qualities and effects, but it does not balance essentially negative assess-

ments . . . with essentially positive assessments" (607). It has proven peculiarly difficult to transform the terms of the discussion.

To resist positions "for" and "against" sentimentality, affirming with Lora Romero that "the politics of culture reside in local formulations . . . rather than in some essential and ineluctable political tendency inhering within them" (7–8), is not to say that the form has no specifiable social meanings. Indeed, it is so full of meanings that we cannot escape the debate simply by recognizing it as a closed circle and announcing its end; we need (as Romero suggests) to study its persistence and investigate its terms. Rather than advocate some purification of terminology, I wish to pursue a fairly abstract description of what we are doing when we call something "sentimental." Complex, culturally powerful categories of this sort are invariably conglomerates. Just what sort of mixed bag is sentimentality?

1. Embodied Thoughts

One element never missing from the combinations that constitute "sentimentality" is an association with emotion. In stigmatizing usages, whether vernacular or expert, the emotion involved is characterized as affected and shallow, or as excessive. In Douglas's account, for example, it is both—a suggestion less contradictory than it seems, since counterfeit emotion may be feigned but is more commonly exaggerated. What is at stake is authenticity: the spontaneity, the sincerity, and the legitimacy of an emotion are understood to be the same. This equivalence underpins commentary by defenders as well; Joanne Dobson, for example, argues that sentimental literature can be "an authentic mode of expressing valid human experience" (175).

Habits of mind based on an opposition between manipulated sentiment and genuine emotion are deeply inconsistent with the social constructionism currently prevailing in the humanities. Yet each of us is a layperson as well as an expert, and according to the common sense of the modern world, feelings well up naturally inside individuals—tropes of interiority and self-expression are difficult to resist. Everyday language also has neutral ways of indicating shaped emotion, of course. One can respectably admit that an object is treasured because it reflexively provokes memory and emotion, because it has what we call "sentimental value." Admitting such a sensation always carries the possibility of embarrassment, just as critics who find sentimentality appealing are haunted by its vulnerability to accusations

of banality and inauthenticity. What we see in these usages taken together is that "sentiment" and its derivatives indicate a moment when emotion is *recognized* as socially constructed.

A definition offered in a volume endeavoring to bring together sociology and psychology makes an unpejorative distinction between sentiment and emotion that resembles the vernacular usages described above. Steven Gordon writes: "I define a sentiment as a socially constructed pattern of sensations, expressive gestures, and cultural meanings organized around a relationship to a social object, usually another person. . . . Most of a culture's vocabulary of named affective states are sentiments rather than emotions" (566). This formulation does not raise questions of authenticity; in fact, the processes by which culture crafts feelings are precisely what interest Gordon and others in the relatively new field of the sociology of emotions. Yet the opposition between sentiment and emotion is still correlated with an opposition between the social and the natural. Once again, the argument depends upon a category—emotion—that is left outside the analysis, taken for granted as a fundamental attribute of human beings.

Many anthropologists and psychologists have seen emotion as a natural phenomenon, and they have worked from that assumption whether or not they tried to explain the mechanisms through which nature worked. But over the past 15 years an impressive body of work in and between the two fields has challenged that view, sometimes in terms closely related to cultural studies. One of the most influential texts has been Michelle Z. Rosaldo's early call for "an anthropology of self and feeling," in which she argues that

> feeling is forever given shape through thought and . . . thought is laden with emotional meaning. [W]hat distinguishes thought and affect, differentiating a "cold" cognition from a "hot," is fundamentally a sense of the engagement of the actor's self. Emotions are thoughts somehow "felt" in flushes, pulses, "movements" of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are *embodied* thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that "I am involved." (143)

This statement is so powerful because it persuasively addresses not only anthropology, not only social science broadly conceived, but also commonsense understandings of emotion. In Rosaldo's account, the social and the bodily nature of sentimentality characterizes emotion in general.

In their introduction to *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (1990), a collection that demonstrates how quickly anthropologists have moved in the direction Rosaldo suggested, Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod describe most anthropological work before 1980 as essentializing, treating emotions as "things internal, irrational, natural." They advocate abandoning the search for "psychobiological" constants underlying locally variable particulars, and functionalist explanations of how different social systems manage emotions, in favor of "contextualizing": analyzing specific social situations to demonstrate how "emotion gets its meaning and force from its location and performance in public discourse" and how social life is affected by emotion discourse (1–2). Their approach challenges naturalizing assumptions and construes emotion as social rather than individual and internal, and brings them very close to the concerns of literary studies. The notion of "discourse," explicated with references to Ferdinand de Saussure and Michel Foucault, is at its center.[1]

In the field of psychology a strong interest in "the cultural factors that contribute to the shaping and the working of human emotions" has emerged, with categories like narrative and "emotion scripts" that point toward the realm of literature figuring prominently (Kitayama and Markus 1). Cultural studies, as an investigation of "the subjective side of social relations," would do well to begin to take heed of such empirical explorations (Johnson 43). Reading (for example) Anna Wierzbicka's account of the affective lexicons of Americans and Poles, learning that in Polish to reply to a compliment by saying "thank you" is potentially offensive (because it treats the remark not as a spontaneous observation but as expressing a desire to please, and therefore might be seen as accusing the speaker of insincerity), can renew one's appreciation of the defamiliarizing power of cross-cultural comparison.

And as social scientists pay more attention to language, humanists may want to reconsider the possibility that components of emotion are "demonstrably hardwired" (Kitayama and Markus 1); Phoebe Ellsworth points out that a comprehensive survey of psychological research yields "abundant evidence for both culturally specific and universal emotional processes" (25). Any experience or examination of the body is mediated by discourse, but that does not mean that literal bodies should be ignored altogether. While anthropologist Arjun Appadurai points out that "emotions have a linguistic life and a public and political status that frequently engender formulaic modes of expression," he also emphasizes that "emotions, unlike other phenomena, appear to have a basis in embodied experience, thus inclining us to see

them as rooted in some elementary biophysical repertoire that is both limited and universal" (92).

Some current empirical research into the physiology of mental life is extraordinarily suggestive. For example, in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), neurologist Anthony Damasio provides a lucid and detailed explanation of how subjectivity can be understood as a "perpetually re-created neurobiological state," with identity depending on the continuous reactivation of two sets of representations: one of memories and one (constantly updated) of body states (100). He shows the brain as continuously responsive, along multiple channels, to neural and chemical signals from various body systems, a kind of "captive audience" (xv) of the body. As Damasio puts it, the "mind is embodied, in the full sense of the term, not just embrained" (118). That self is the ground of all mental activity, and there can be, on Damasio's account, no such thing as selfless or wholly unemotional reason. Feelings, the cognitions most closely linked to body landscapes, are woven into mental activity at every stage. To use Rosaldo's metaphor, some cognitions are cool in comparison with others, but none are at absolute zero. Indeed, Damasio cites clinical and experimental evidence to show that individuals with impaired affect also show impaired decision making; lack of emotion causes people to behave foolishly (52–79).[2]

Congenial as the implications of such research might seem to be for feminist epistemology (for example), only extended interdisciplinary collaboration can build a middle ground on which evidence of such different sorts could be melded. And only on such a landscape can we respond appropriately to work like Paul Ekman's on the cross-cultural recognizability of facial expressions, or Robert Zajonc's on how the action of facial muscles that produce expressions may actually create subjective sensations by altering blood temperatures in the brain (see Ellsworth; Zajonc and McIntosh). Only such collaboration will allow us to avoid either naturalizing by claiming that physiology entails particular experiential or behavioral consequences or rejecting evidence because it conflicts with our social constructionist convictions, so that we can study how physiological processes might enter variably into cultural processes. This prospective intellectual landscape is so hard to imagine partly because such research is rarely available in expositions as accessible to humanists as *Descartes' Error.* It contributes to the difficulty that literary scholarship has, in Neal Oxenhandler's formulation some time ago, "no thoroughgoing affective criticism as such. Although emotive terms

serve to locate certain crucially sensitive areas in the reading process, they themselves have never become the locus of a sustained theoretical account" (105).

What are the consequences of these explorations for understanding sentimentality within the horizon of literary and cultural studies? Definitions that rely on judgments of authenticity or inauthenticity are thus decisively undermined. Beyond that, neither the socially constructed nor the bodily nature of sentiment can distinguish it from emotion in general. Rather, expert ascriptions of sentimentality—like vernacular remarks—mark moments when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible. Many usages of the term are of this order, indicating that the conventionalized quality of some affective response has been noted without implying strong or systematic distinctions among artifacts or situations that evoke emotion. Even this relatively modest clarification has benefits. It moves us out of the terms of the Douglas-Tompkins debate into a less judgmental mode, making it clear that characterizing something as sentimental should open, not close, a conversation. Still, we need to explain why sentimentality should be judged negatively. It is condemned so vehemently in part because its critics feel implicated in it (as Douglas avows she does). Further, the social construction of emotion becomes visible when attitudes about what sensations are appropriate (what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild calls "feeling rules") clash. Although not always stigmatized, sentimentality is always suspect; the appearance of the term marks a site where values are contested. We need to examine the nature of that contest, and why a particular range of emotions calls up the term when others do not: horror-movie conventions, however stylized, are rarely described as sentimental. We are left to the task of analyzing a particular set of emotion scripts, in the midst of the ever-widening conversations about the history of emotions and social life.

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2. Feeling Right

A comprehensive view of sentiment cannot begin later than the eighteenth century. Critics of earlier generations routinely nodded to the British origins of sentimentalism. More recently, however, many Americanists have neglected the transatlantic and philosophical antecedents of the form. Against the prevailing assumptions of the Douglas-Tompkins debate, I argue that there is a strong relationship between Enlightenment notions of moral

sentiments and sympathy and nineteenth- and twentieth-century sentimentalism. Making that link helps us to understand the significance of contemporary usages.

Philosophers like Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau derive benevolence and, ultimately, morality in general from human faculties that dispose us to sympathize with others. For these thinkers, emotions, whether they are innate or produced by Lockean psychology, assume a central place in moral thought—they both lead to and manifest virtue. As contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor puts it, sentiment matters because it is "the touchstone of the morally good. Not because feeling that something is good makes it so . . . [but because] feeling is my way of access into the design of things" (284). The natural goodness of humanity (affirmed with varying degrees of conviction) is visible most directly in our sensations of compassion, and the goodness of God is visible in the implanting of such faculties in humanity.

Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989) shows selves as inescapably oriented by the moral sources they acknowledge. It also shows the sense of deeply resonant interiority as fundamental to modern identity. The eighteenth-century moral philosophers occupy an important place in the process by which moral sources are relocated inward. At the same time ordinary life comes to be affirmed as profoundly valuable. The latter view, Taylor points out, is not as obvious as we tend to assume—the record of ancient and medieval thought more often shows some sphere of activity, whether that of the warrior or the philosopher, as intrinsically higher than the everyday. The affirmation sustains what is virtually a moral consensus in the modern world on the values of justice and benevolence: we may not agree about why it is so, or what it would mean to live up to this standard, but we believe that inflicting suffering is wrong and that relieving suffering is good, perhaps even imperative.

The notion of "sentiment" as used in eighteenth-century texts is a crucial element of this modern moral identity. It coordinates complex recognitions of the power of bodily sensations (including emotions), the possibilities of feeling distant from or connected with other human beings, and benevolence as a defining human virtue. A memorable passage from the opening of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) binds these elements together to conjure a resolution of the dilemma posed by the increasingly individualist topography of the self:

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our sense will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (9)

Smith both recognizes the social and relational character of emotions and focuses on discrete subjectivity, so closely and productively that he is virtually producing the deep interior self. The vicariousness so often criticized in sentimentality is here seen more neutrally as one of its structural elements. The emotion in question is precisely one felt as an identification with another.[3]

The imagination plays a central role in Smith's scenario for sympathy. So it is not surprising that reading was seen as a way to cultivate improving, morally legitimating emotions. Indeed, the extensive English literature of sensibility—Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) is the most programmatic example, but the works of Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne are better known—complements the moral philosophers' expositions. Again, it is not surprising that the wide circulation of these narratives provoked the deflating impulse visible in works like Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741) and (more complexly) Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). "Sentimentality" itself originates in the reaction against the elevation of emotional sensitivity to the status of a moral touchstone. Janet Todd tells us that the word "came in as a pejorative term in the 1770's when the idea of sensibility was losing ground"; although the adjective "sentimental" has been used more variously, "by 1800 its use was commonly pejorative" (8, 9). The celebratory and the stigmatizing views of sentiment arise together.

Antisentimentalism has sometimes occluded recognition of the tradition's influence in literature. Yet as Fred Kaplan has shown, the English Victorians continue to draw directly and deeply on moral philosophy; Charles Dickens is sentimental in a much more precise sense than usually acknowledged. Across the Atlantic, Herbert Ross Brown's once-definitive study *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789–1860* (1940) clearly marks the form's philosophical and British roots but treats the connection as dismissively as the novels.[4] Intellectual historians have delineated the profound influence in antebellum America of Smith's inheritors, the Scottish Common Sense philosophers. Certainly some contemporary critics draw on these materials.[5] Most do not; Joanne Dobson's fine recent analysis of the specifically literary qualities of sentimental writing, for example, defines the form in terms of "human connectedness" without ever mentioning moral philosophy. Recovering these connections allows us to read an essay like Laura Wexler's "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform" (1992) not as a negative assessment of sentimentality but as a contribution to the project of historicizing benevolence.

Only a long, broad view of sentimentality makes it possible to see how many scholars' work contributes to the construction of this object of study, for we are investigating the development of modern subjectivities in their intricate imbrication with belief systems and social structures. Our horizon should include not only Taylor's sources of the self but also Norbert Elias's "civilizing process." Thomas Haskell argues that humanitarianism depends upon a shift in cognitive styles under capitalism. Jean-Christophe Agnew sees the emphasis on "fellow-feeling" as a mark of the distance and potential hostility separating individuals in a world of commodity transactions. Mary Louise Pratt shows sentiment, with its clashing complement science, suturing the self into the new social relations of imperialism. In Peter Hulme's memorable formulation, "Sentimental sympathy began to flow out along the veins of European commerce in search of its victims" (229). On this large landscape, a debate over whether a genre (let alone a novel) is conservative or progressive sounds thin and reductive indeed. The critical edge of the conversation is not lost but redirected to defamiliarize contemporary values like "empathy" as the ritual disavowal of sentimentality never could.

Another consequence of this long view remains to be articulated. So far in this account, sentimentality has been at least as closely linked with men as with women. As subjective and social

life are remapped into their modern configurations, emotion is correlated with the private as opposed to the public, and with the feminine as opposed to the masculine. Feminist research over three decades has achieved a rich reconstruction of gender ideologies and women's lives in past eras, and literary critics have drawn on and contributed to that scholarship. But much of it contains an unremarked, confusing elision between sentimentality and domesticity. We have paid little attention to the slippage from Tompkins's "sentimental power" to Mary Kelley's "literary domestics," from Wexler's account of the debate over sentimentality to her subtitle's reference to "domestic fiction." To fail to distinguish the two categories is to become unable to examine the complex historical process that weaves them together. We also need to avoid relying on static and dated conceptions of "separate spheres." Barbara Welter's 1966 essay on the "cult of true womanhood" continues to be cited long after more dynamic accounts have prevailed among historians. The public-private binary can no longer function as an explanation; rather the distinction itself is an important object of analysis. This essay is drawn from a longer study in which I examine the sentimental pedagogy of subjectivity, and middle-class claims to moral authority, as constitutive elements in the modern organization of social life into distinct domains.[6] The domestic sphere is also, of course, the very home of consumer culture, and books are among the commodities that circulate through that intimate realm. Sentimentality is stigmatized, not only because it is associated with women, but because the "packaged" quality of emotion that is so visibly a social construction is a distasteful reminder that the partition of public and private can never really separate them.

3. Feeling and Form

How then, on this broad terrain, are we to think about sentimentality in literature, and particularly in American literary history? I began by affirming the importance of attending to the sheer variety and flexibility of the form (although that is not the task this essay has undertaken), and I have directed attention to its deployment of the power of sympathy and its embedding in the practice of domestic reading. We should recognize as well that, in postbellum America, the literary was often defined *against* sentimentality and the domestic culture of letters.[7] Prestigious writing gradually and unevenly became less openly emotional and more ambitiously intellectual, less directly didactic

and more conspicuously masculine. Antisentimentalism is an important part of that story, especially for literary studies.

Henry James was an articulate spokesman for the reaction against sentiment. He writes, in an 1867 review, that Rebecca Harding Davis has made herself "the poet of poor people" but that her material cannot justify her manner:

> She drenches the whole field beforehand with a flood of lachrymose sentimentalism, and riots in the murky vapors which rise in consequence of the act. . . . Nothing is more respectable on the part of a writer—a novelist—than the intelligent sadness which forces itself upon him on the completion of a dramatic scheme which is in strict accordance with human life and its manifold miseries. But nothing is more trivial than that intellectual temper which, for ever dissolved in the melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition. . . . Spontaneous pity is an excellent emotion, but there is nothing so hardening as to have your pity for ever tickled and stimulated, and nothing so debasing as to become an agent between the supply and demand of the commodity. (221–22)

We see in this review not only James's youthful vehemence, even arrogance, but also his sharp recognition of key elements of sentimentality: its association with tears, with humanitarian reform, with convention and commodification.

This critique does not in any sense defeat sentimentality (any more than Fielding's or Austen's did). The form pervasively persists, beyond this moment and into the present. In the late nineteenth century its legitimating conventions and capacity for engendering solidarities were particularly important for writers with minimal print access, such the first African-American and Native American novelists.[8] Complex transformations of those conventions continued; Charles Chesnutt's use of sentimentality in the frame narrative for *The Conjure Woman* (1899), for example, constitutes a critique as well as a deployment of the form. Sentimentality remains a powerful element of popular literature, and one can scarcely find a canonical author—including James—who is not drawing on or in dialogue with the tradition. That continues to be so even when modernism, with its hostility toward received forms and middle-class culture in general, intensified the animus against sentimentality.[9]

Meanwhile the emerging profession of literary scholarship also defined literature against the domestic and popular and pro-

gressively masculinized it—although, given the profound identification of interiority and literature with the feminine, that masculinization seems always in need of reassertion. This is not only a matter of excluding women writers (although, as Paul Lauter among others has shown, it certainly is that). The whole conceptual landscape of criticism, particularly the system of genres, is organized according to gender-inflected values. James wrote against "all those persons, whether men or women, who pursue literature under the sole guidance of sentimentalism" (222), and in Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's 1946 anthology *Understanding Fiction* (a classic if forgotten site of New Critical antisentimentalism) the target is not domestic fiction—those writers have already been excluded from the table of contents—but the regionalist Bret Harte.

Brooks and Warren's "Glossary" gives a definition of sentimentality very close to the one with which I began: "Emotional response in excess of the occasion; emotional response which has not been prepared for in the story in question" (608). It seems likely that this is not just an example but a source of the view that sentimental feelings are simultaneously unreal and overdone; even those who have never seen the text may have had English teachers—or English teachers taught by English teachers—influenced by its magisterial pronouncements. Brooks and Warren raise respectful questions about emotion in Dickens ("Is 'The Poor Relation's Story' sentimental? . . . Does not our acceptance of the story as unsentimental depend, to some extent at least, on its being grounded firmly in the character?" [241]) and James Joyce (the story is "Araby"). Harte, on the other hand, is treated in the vocabulary of pathology used later by Douglas; about "Tennessee's Partner" they write, "[T]his straining for an emotional effect is one of the surest symptoms that one is dealing with a case of *sentimentality* (see Glossary)." A sentimental person "weeps at some trivial occurrence," "lacks a sense of proportion and gets a morbid enjoyment from an emotional debauch for its own sake" (219). This distaste is in part mapped onto style, in thoroughly gendered and embodied language (other symptoms are a tendency to "prettify" language and editorializing, "nudging the reader to respond" [219]), in part onto characterization.

What Brooks and Warren are most offended by, however, is not domestic ideology but the story's *failure* to defend family values when it allows the Partner's loyalty to survive Tennessee's elopement with his wife. Why, they ask, "does Tennessee's Partner forgive Tennessee so easily for the wife-stealing? The matter is never explained, and we learn nothing of the state of mind

which led the partner to the decision. In other words, Bret Harte has dodged the real psychological issue of his story" (215). On this masculine literary landscape, the story that provokes their most vehement condemnation focuses on love between men, and it fails to confine emotion to its proper sphere. The Partner displays the suffering, sentimental male body that Eve Sedgwick considers "the exemplary instance of the sentimental" in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature, a character that, by her account, "dramatizes, embodies for an audience that both desires and cathartically identifies with him, a struggle of masculine identity with emotions or physical stigmata stereotyped as feminine" (146).[10] Our twentieth-century usages of sentimentality are routed through not only the paradoxes of public/private but also the double bind of homo/heterosexual identity. Both the inseparability of binaries I have already noted and the observable nature of such polemics show that Sedgwick is right in proposing that "there isn't a differentiation to be *made* between sentimentality and its denunciation" (153).

Various tropes have focused sentimental discourses in various periods; Sedgwick's discussion of the sentimental man is complemented by Ann Cvetkovich's study of the suffering woman in Victorian fiction, and I would suggest that the equivalent for our own moment may be the figure of the endangered child.[11] Again, my task here is not developing such specific analyses but delineating a productive conceptual landscape for them.

The view of the form that I am proposing does not generate definitive answers to the question of whether something is sentimental, or not, an inquiry that is in principle unanswerable. Rather, the process by which one creates and evaluates possible responses generates the social meaning of the category. Nor can any account of the form end discussion and produce a consensus for a single definition of sentimentality. We can organize answers to the question "what is sentimentality?" like this. Most broadly—when we call an artifact or gesture sentimental, we are pointing to its use of some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible. Most commonly—we are recognizing that a trope from the immense repertory of sympathy and domesticity has been deployed; we recognize the presence of at least some fragmentary element of an intellectual and literary tradition. Most narrowly—we are asserting that literary works belong to a genre in which those conventions and tropes are central. But that does not undermine the importance of the recognition that sentimental works consistently engage us in the intricate impasse of the public and private, proclaiming their separation

and at the same time demonstrating their inseparability. As emotion, embodied thought that animates cognition with the recognition of the self's engagement; as sympathy, firmly based in the observer's body and imaginatively linking it to another's; as domestic culture, in the peculiar intimacy of the print commodity; sentimentality at the same time locates us in our embodied and particular selves and takes us out of them.

Notes

1 Lutz and Abu-Lughod have separately authored important books contributing to the new anthropology of emotion Their claim that this anthropological work accepts the "psychological orthodoxy" that emotions are "psychobiological processes that respond to cross-cultural environmental differences but retain a robust essence untouched by the social or cultural" (2) should be regarded with some skepticism Compare Phoebe Ellsworth's account of psychology in the 1960s as dominated by cultural relativism, an orthodoxy that was successfully challenged by the research into universals that is currently being challenged by social constructionism (24–25)

2 I should note that the patients Damasio discusses show impaired decision making only in some areas, and that testing the phenomenon requires considerable ingenuity

Although Damasio deals wonderfully with questions of individual variation and with the debate over innate versus acquired characteristics, there is no place for culture, class, race, or gender in his analysis Anyone led by these comments to examine the book will need to persist through the historically insensitive discussion in the first chapter

3 The theatricality of the relations of sympathy in French and English literature of this period has also been anatomized by David Marshall My thinking here owes much to conversations with Adela Pinch, whose perspective is now available in *Strange Fits of Passion Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (1996)

4 Making this connection constitutes only a small part of the analysis needed to place any given sentimental fiction in the moment of its production, the fine historical work of Cathy Davidson, essays in *The Culture of Sentiment,* and most recently the work of Elizabeth Barnes offer a multitude of other frameworks for the early American novel

5 See Philip Fisher, Jay Fliegelman, Gregg Camfield (especially on Stowe's famous injunction to the reader to "feel right"), and Barnes

6 The longer version of this essay is part of a work in progress titled "Publishing the Family" It pays particular attention to works by Nancy Armstrong, Mary Ryan, Stuart Blumin, Karen Halttunen, and Lauren Berlant and discusses the contribution of Jurgen Habermas to understanding the intimate as well as the public sphere

7 See Richard H Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993), and, for an incisive overview, Brodhead's entry ("Literature and Culture") in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988)

8 See, e g , Richard Yarborough and Susan Bernardin The phrase "minimal print access" is Bernardin's

9 Suzanne Clark has told this story insightfully, and traced the return of the repressed, in *Sentimental Modernism Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (1991)

10 I would argue that masculine- and feminine-inflected versions of sentiment coexist for much longer than Sedgwick indicates but would agree that the formation she describes takes on a particularly vexed power in this period

11 I develop this suggestion in an unpublished manuscript

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