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Sterne's Economics of Sentimentalism

In his etymological dictionary, Ernest Klein tied the genesis of the word 'sentimental' to the emerging genre of the 'sentimental novel', noting that 'sentimental' was 'coined by the English clergyman and novelist, Laurence Sterne, in 1767', the year that *A Sentimental Journey* was written (Klein, p.672). This attribution is too good to be true; by the evidence of a 1749 letter to Richardson that contains the first recorded usage (*OED*), the origin of the word and its meaning remain unclear. The letter asks for help in defining the term, observing that it was 'in vogue among the polite' and was a complimentary expression applied to 'every thing clever and agreeable'. In this light, 'sentimental' appears at first to have intimated little beyond an association with high status and refinement.

Yet by the 1790s, the adjective had assumed its lasting pejorative connotation of gratuitous emotion (Mullan, p.236), and the faddish literary phenomenon of the 'sentimental novel' had ended. Richetti argues that the sentimental novel became highly fashionable in mid-century England as it was 'a celebration of private and domestic virtue and solitary philanthropy' in the face of a new climate of 'rapacious and uncompromising possessive individualism' (Richetti, p.8), and although he does not go on to explain the genre's subsequent decline, his argument for its historical contingency implies a fall. Once people had adapted to the culture of 'possessive individualism', sentimental novels might have appeared as saccharine to them as 1960s Hollywood romances can to us today.

However, a reading of sentimentalism in Sterne's fiction quickly reveals problems with the account of sentimentalism as 'solitary philanthropy' at odds with 'possessive individualism'. *A Sentimental Journey,* lauded in publications like the *Lady's Magazine* as being representative of the best sentimental novels (Mayo, p.190), embodies the tensions between the sentimental and the pecuniary, collapsing distinctions between philanthropy and individualism to the extent that sentimentalism often appears to be little more than a veil for self-indulgent profligacy.

The lively eighteenth-century philosophical debate on the nature of sentiment illuminates the tensions in Sterne's conception of the sentimental. Hutcheson's influential philosophy of moral sentiment declared that 'our Sentiment or Perception of [Virtue's] Beauty cannot [be counterballanc'd by Interest]; as it certainly might be, if the only Ground of our Approbation were Views of Advantage' (Hutcheson, II.I.V, pp.94–95). Sentiment describes not only impressions, but also an innate perceptive faculty defined negatively insofar as it cannot be weighed against material 'Views of Advantage'. Hutcheson was writing in rebuttal of Mandeville, who propounded a radically Hobbesian view of humanity's self-interest in his *Fable of the Bees Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*. Mandeville's polemic argues that it is easy to 'deny the Sentiments of our Hearts' but not the 'Seeds of every Passion' (p.174), employing the metaphor of a beehive to maintain that 'Vice' actually produces 'Paradise':

> Every Part was full of Vice,
> Yet the whole Mass a Paradise;
> [… They were] lavish of their Wealth and Lives,
> The Balance of all other Hives. ('The Grumbling Hive', ll. 155–56, 159–60, p.5)

The language of abundance, exemplified in the quantitative noun and preposition pairs, 'full of' and 'lavish of', comes to a head in 'Balance of', where 'Balance' has the sense of a high standard to

aspire to rather than a moderating measure. Passions are reduced to an egoism that is healthy for the hive. Although Mandeville's view may have been an extreme one, it is one that, I shall argue, sheds light on *A Sentimental Journey*, whereas Hutcheson's ideas more broadly inform the presentation of sentiment in *Tristram Shandy.*

Sterne's tendency in *Shandy* to 'defer closure, generate continuations and spin-off projects' (Keymer, p.149) meant that he was easily able to incorporate fashionable trends like sentimentalism into new volumes. Ralph Griffiths's long-running *Monthly Review* censured the 'dull, gross and vulgar' elements of the novel (Griffiths, p.102), reserving praise for the sentimentalism that figures in the novel's familial scenes. Perhaps in response, by Book IX Sterne had foregrounded the endearing 'Uncle Toby', but otherwise glowing reviews continued to complain that *Shandy* retained a 'groundwork of buffoonry' which offset the beauty (Griffiths, p.102). This criticism missed the way that *Shandy's* sentimental episodes manifest their powerful effects through their great dissimilarity from the otherwise excursive and obscene material of the novel. One instance of beautifully rendered sentiment occurs in the first volume of *Shandy,* during a chapter typically replete with Toby's militaristic verbiage. No sooner has Shandy's father complained that Toby would 'provoke a saint' with his nonsense, than the narrative veers into a hagiographic mode — Toby literally "wouldn't harm a fly":

> Go poor Devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee? — This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me. (II.xxii, p.91)

The sentimental effect arises out of contrasts: the contrast between the curse — which probably offended eighteenth-century ears — and the sympathy that Toby demonstrates shortly afterwards; the contrast between the usual prolixity of Toby's military digressions and the pacifism that he expresses here in brevity; the contrast between the explosive, short clauses before the hyphen and the calm aphoristic sentence that follows it. Furthermore, most of this rare moment of affection has a pronounced iambic rhythm that marks it out from the surrounding text. The scene is Hutchesonian insofar as Toby's interest in crushing the pestering creature is immediately reigned in by a sense of overwhelming inner solidarity with it. Moreover, this solidarity elicits great sympathy from Tristram, who becomes 'one vibration of most pleasurable sensation' (p.91). The reader in turn is encouraged to tap into the faculty of sentiment and resonate with good feeling, appreciating the way that this arrestingly candid and compassionate scene has abruptly surfaced out of a sea of circumlocution.

Yet in *A Sentimental Journey,* sentimentalism functions in a different manner. There is no such effect of contrast. To ostensibly fulfil the dual goals of selling well and making amends for his old improprieties, Sterne accommodated a far greater proportion of the warmly direct maxims which he had scattered only sparsely amongst *Tristram's* periphrastic narrative. The following, for instance, are found on consecutive pages:

> What a large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life by him who interests his heart in every thing, and who, […] misses nothing he can *fairly* lay his hands on. (*Journey,* p.36)

> A man my good Sir, has seldom an offer of kindness to make to a woman, but she has a presentiment of it some moments before. (p.35)

And yet these maxims are far from being straightforwardly sentimental. The first encodes a startling implication given the seemingly cordial surface reading — the main clause is frequently taken out of context, yet the emphasised '*fairly*' in the qualifying clause is key, for it modulates the whole phrase to advocate opportunistic avarice. In the second quotation, the wordplay on 'presentiment' seems at first mild, although when its full significance is realised in the light of the first maxim, it becomes curiously indecorous, considering that it refers to a woman's pleasure in anticipating a sinisterly undefined overture from a man whom she hardly knows. Nevertheless, at this stage there is still the lingering sense that Yorick is simply naïve, or that he is pursuing a *carpe diem* philosophy as a means of keeping his 'blood awake' (p.37), his enviably consistent optimism papering over a fatal subtextual sickness.

However, later events in *A Sentimental Journey* lay bare the way in which Yorick's optimism also masks a sickness in the ideology of sentimentalism. In one episode, he 'loll[s] on [a] counter' with a beautiful 'grisette' before buying her wares and commenting that she missed the chance to extract at least one extra 'sous' for the intimacy that she provided 'a stranger' (p.74). In another, he remarks that a woman is looking at him so cheerfully that one would have thought that he had 'been laying out fifty louis d'ors with her' (p.69). Yorick's insistently mercantile language aligns him more with a Crusoe than a Shandy. To his roving mind, sentiment has a precise exchange rate with French coin; he even attempts to induct the reader into this discourse:

> I gave him – no matter what – I am ashamed to say how much now, - and was ashamed to think how little, then: so, if the reader can form any conjecture of my disposition, as these two fixed points are given him, he may judge within a livre or two what was the precise sum. (p.49)

Although sentimentalism seems to risk spilling into shame of exorbitance, the parallelism ('ashamed to say'/'ashamed to think') transforms this shame into an opportunity to involve the reader in making estimates of just how high a monetary value the narrator places on emotion, accentuating the self-congratulatory nature of sentimental philanthropy. The permission given by 'may' hints at how the entire episode has been enacted with the entertainment and approval of the reader in mind. Here, the novel touches on one of the gravest concerns of contemporary moral philosophy: the injustice, as Adam Smith noted, in the fact that 'the profligacy of a man of fashion is looked upon with much less contempt and aversion, than that of a man of meaner condition' (*Essential Adam Smith*, p.87). Sterne's narrator, supposedly a clergyman, exemplifies Smith's model of the profligate rich — Yorick increasingly depicts the idea of sentiment as the privilege of throwing away low-denomination coins on beggars and garnering a feeling of authority in return. Even after purportedly feeling shameful of his own profligacy, he spends a paragraph observing the most fortunate beneficiary, convincing himself that the '*pauvre honteux* […] thanked [him] more than them all' (p.49). It is as if he desires that his money evokes a sympathetic reaction in direct proportion to the amount donated. By the time that a hotel owner complains that Yorick is 'overthrow[ing] the credit of his hotel' (p.127), a scene cleverly juxtaposed with a vignette of Yorick salving his own anger by consciously adopting a 'fund of honest cullibility' towards yet another 'grisette' (p.128), sentimentalism has patently become a pretext for a sort of cavalier superiority.

But on the other hand, in a Mandevillean sense this is to dwell far too much on the 'private vices' of Yorick whilst neglecting the 'public benefit' that they precipitate. *A Sentimental Journey* dramatises the way that Yorick's pursuit of sentimentalism gives rise to a great deal of generosity,

even if his original motives were suspect. Brissenden neatly points out that 'the real paradox with which Sterne is concerned is not that benevolence leads to carnality but that carnality leads to benevolence' (Brissenden, p.219). But this chiasmatic statement skirts over the economics of sentimentalism in drawing to the fore the word 'carnality' and its sinful overtones. The number of mutually beneficial trades that sentimentalism engenders and even adds value to becomes the true foil to a completely cynical reading. The best example is the exchange of snuffboxes, for it unusually leaves Yorick the beneficiary of sentimentalism, and the novel makes clear chapters later that he remains touched by the 'meek and courteous spirit' of the monk crystallised in his *memento mori* (p.81). However, this point can be pursued to absurdity, as it is difficult to ignore the power dynamic when Yorick fetishistically encourages a poor chambermaid to knit him a purse to enclose his canvassing crowns (p.123).

A Sentimental Journey, in this respect, was Sterne's cynical last jest, a jest that exposed the way that sentimentalism — which Hutcheson's followers believed to spring from an innate, uncorrupted faculty — really had more to do with pursestrings than heartstrings. Yet at the same time, the novel demonstrates how sentimentalism can have a bewilderingly benign effect, by promoting, to adapt Richetti's phrase from the introduction, a sort of 'possessive philanthropy'.

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