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"THE SENTIMENTAL TRIBUTE OF A TEAR": SELF-REGARDING EMOTION, WRONG SYMPATHY, AND SENTIMENTAL IRONY IN HENRY MACKENZIE'S THE MAN OF FEELING

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Abstract. Considered the paragon of (ironic) sentimentalism, Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling* strengthens the idea that the "Age of Sensibility" is narrowly and vaguely defined by scholars and historians of ideas as a proposal, not as a historical label. A coinage of the eighteenth century, "sentimental" brought major changes in meaning at the time, implying both physical and mental perception. A community of feeling was thus possible by analogy with a community of sense (*sensus communis*). The paper aims to demonstrate how the *sensus communis* is ironically dismantled and seen as idiosyncratic through the lens of the refined sensibility advocated by Harley, the main character of the novel, who mingles joy and grief when facing public action. His sentimental benevolence and sympathy, in Adam Smith's terms, appear as an endeavour to reshape manners, a project which fails because Harley can only deplore the social customs of the time. Harley's sentimentalism is best expressed by tears. His benevolence runs parallel with the sceptical view of society and the world that prevents him from acting virtuously. Filtered through the history of ideas (sentimentalism as a case in point), the paper tackles sentiment and self-regarding emotion as "outraged" morality.

Narrowly and vaguely defined by scholars and historians of ideas, the "Age of Sensibility", Martin Price argues, "is only a proposal, not a historical label" (qtd. in Brissenden 11). Before being tangled in the web of flexible and elusive definitions whenever associated with the term "sentimentalism", which is a coinage of the eighteenth century, "sensibility" referred primarily to reason, intellect and mental perception. Spawning a wide range of meanings and connotations in the late eighteenth century, such as "shallow", "excessive", "insincere", the word "sentimental" simply overlapped with "sensibility" to such an extent that no clear distinction could be made between them. A community of feeling was thus possible by analogy with a community of sense (*sensus communis*). If *experience* is their common denominator, then we can understand why "sensible" also acquired the meaning of physical perception. "Experience, which is constantly contradicting theory, is the great test of truth", argues Samuel Johnson (qtd. in Parker 8), when the intellect endeavours to pursue true knowledge. If John Locke was highly suspicious of confident opinions formulated in the process of gaining true knowledge, the sentimentalists asserted the "cultural rightness" of the observer's private judgements (Motooka 20). It was David Hume's Pyrrhonian scepticism that paved the way for the subsequent confusion of the two terms. According to Hume, mind cannot attain to certain knowledge and morality is deep-seated in sentiment, which gives birth to an empirically unverified moral truth. Furthermore, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* sentiment, which becomes synonymous with passion, turns into an "ideological strategy" (Mullan 23) that imposes a model of social relations based on *sympathy* understood as "an intercourse of sentiments" (*Treatise* 603) able to create social harmony in a very disinterested manner.

Partially echoing the Latitudinarian divines' precepts of benevolence, charity and good action, or Shaftesbury's idea of innate moral good, Hume's notion of sympathy elevates sentiment, if not passions, to the rank of virtue, by "complete and immediate communication" (Mullan 30). It has nothing to do with self-interest or with the Mandevillian "hidden Design" (i.e. vested interests) which produces "public

benefits". Viewed in this way, sentimental benevolence is labelled in the second half of the century as "moral refinement" or "Delicacy". *The Universal Magazine* (qtd. in Ellis 5) writes in 1778 that

it must be allowed that Delicacy of Sentiment... adds greatly to the happiness of mankind, by diffusing an universal benevolence. It teaches men to feel for others as for themselves; it disposes us to rejoice with the happy, and by partaking to increase their pleasure... It excites a pleasing sensation in our own breast, which if its duration be considered, may be places among the highest gratifications of sense.

Easily and ambiguously defined, the sentimental praised as virtue brings into question the dilemma enclosed self – outgoing sympathy. Based on weak thought, since, in Hume's terms, reason is the slave of the passions, the sentimental self, able to produce this type of sympathy for the sake of social order, unalterable communication and harmony, becomes virtuous as long as it is only the projection of an ideal, as long as it remains just a feeling, not a *principle*, to paraphrase Henry Mackenzie. The harsh discrepancy between feeling and understanding, between private feeling, social conventions and public action is part of the critique addressed by sentimental novels. Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* is a case in point.

Starting from the above-mentioned premises, the present paper tries to demonstrate that Mackenzie's novel, apart from being a paragon of sentimentalism as a genre, highlights the social and philosophical implications of the term "sentimental" and critiques, at the same time, Hume's coherent social model whose applicability to a "world of feeling" is both risible and impossible. *The Man of Feeling* is, in John Mullan's words, "the terminal formula" of the sentimental novel because, with all its talk of virtue, it cannot reflect at all on the problems of conduct, the practices of any existing society" (Mullan 118-9). I also read the novel as a correction of Hume's notion of sympathy by alluding to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which launches the idea of Stoic *self-command* achieved via a relationship between an agent and an impartial spectator.

A member of the Edinburgh elite, lawyer by trade, editor and writer for two popular periodicals, *The Mirror* (1779-80) and *The Lounger* (1785-87), Henry Mackenzie was "both personally and professionally concerned with social morality" (Benedict 117). Dividing society into sentimental (private feeling) and pragmatic individuals (public action), he desperately, and idealistically, wanted to see them as complementary. As a lawyer, therefore as a practical man in real life, he gave birth to an epitome of fictional sensitive virtue that found no correspondent in everyday life and society. In other words, "the practical man", comments Mullan, "produced the impractical model" (Mullan 118). Mullan also informs us that

the gap between the social identity that Mackenzie styled for himself and the exemplary Man of Feeling that he created was recorded retrospectively by Henry Cockburn, a fellow Edinburgh lawyer: "Strangers used to fancy that he must be a pensive sentimental Harley (i.e. the hero of the novel); whereas he was far better – a hard headed practical man, as full of worldly wisdom as most of his fictitious characters are devoid of it; and this without in the least impairing the affectionate softness of his heart" (D. Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* qtd. in Mullan 118).

Despite his benevolent sentimentalism, Harley is an impractical model because his exceedingly refined sensibility is at loggerheads with civic and conventional background. He becomes a Quixote whose sentimental "weapon" - tears - has no real target in the physical world. Far from being didactic, the novel displays sympathy in the wrong way, if we follow Hume's model, and pathetic emotion as self-regarding and, after all, as virtue replacing judgement. The focal point of Mackenzie's novel is precisely the "distrust of sentimental literary values, especially the formula that feeling guarantees virtue" (Benedict 118). It deconstructs Hume's idea of communicable passions, in that Harley is seized with a storm of feelings which annihilates *logos*: "There were a thousand sentiments; - but they gushed so impetuously on his heart, that he could not utter a syllable" (70).

In her seminal book entitled *The Age of Reasons*, Wendy Motooka analyses the pejorative sense of "sentimentalism", since the moral truth cannot be empirically accessible. If so, "the fact that it must go

empirically unverified, allowing plausible alternatives to flourish and multiply, gives rise to sentimentalism's tendency to ground itself by locating superior sensibility in particular communities" (Motooka 21). Such a particular community (of sense) is depicted and produced in *The Man of Feeling* and set against the "background" of a sentimental individual who claims that this community is characterised by moral uniformity. In this respect, Hume argues, "the passions are so contagious, that they pass with greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts" (Hume 605). Thus, they lead to "fundamental sociability found in every encounter with "others" (Mullan 29). The refined sensibility advocated by Harley mingles, in Hume's words, joy and grief when facing public action. His sympathy appears as an endeavour to reshape manners, a project which fails because Harley can only deplore the social customs of the time. His benevolence runs parallel with the sceptical view of society and the world which prevents him from acting virtuously. Hence, the idea of sentimental irony translated by pathetic tears: "taken for the determinations of reason", says Hume, "calm passions are recognized as effects, not as immediate feeling or sensation" (Hume 417-18). Harley's self remains secluded and veiled by *unprincipled* emotions which trigger the physiological act of crying because the hero "confuses self-regard with the regard for and of nature" (Benedict 120). It is in this way that "the sentimental tribute of a tear exacted by a spectacle of virtue in distress was an acknowledgement at once of man's inherent goodness and of the impossibility of his ever being able to demonstrate his goodness effectively" (Brissenden 29). Harley's "inherent goodness" does not lead to public actions, as it should do, but remains only a sentimental discursive practice that makes him sensible in the proper sense of the word: since reason cannot give any boost to motivation, as Hume declares, it can at least capture, empirically again, the "way of the world". Reason is practically obliterated yet discursively useful. On the other hand, the "ambiguities of sentimental irony" (Benedict 118) illustrated by Mackenzie's novel can be clarified if we refer to passions as passive and non-stimulating in Harley's case, for moral judgments, which are the product of feeling rather than judgement, are supposed to guide man's action in order to achieve "his potentiality, act and telos", to quote Alasdair MacIntyre (50). Here is a reasonable Harley, "a child in the drama of the world" (10) who moans the corrupted, hypocritical and Mandevillian world he lives in:

The immense riches acquired by individuals have erected a standard of ambition, *destructive of private morals*, and of public virtue. (...)The frivolous and the interested (might a satirist say) are the characteristic features of the age; they are visible even in the essays of our philosophers. (...) And the *manly tone of reason* is exchanged for perpetual efforts at sneer and ridicule. This I hold to be an alarming crisis in the corruption of a state; when not only is virtue declined, and vice prevailing, but when the praises of virtue are forgotten, and the infamy of vice unfelt (Mackenzie 57) (emphasis mine).

This quotation raises two major ambiguities related to ideology and gender, both triggered by sentimentalism as "thinking through feeling". On the one hand, the "destruction of private morals, and of public virtue" actually filtered by Mackenzie through Mandeville's "private vices, public benefits" in order to justify the allegedly meritocratic and commercial trading society of the time alludes to the impossibility of sympathy to manifest itself in "a state" or in society. These bad attributes are not endemic, but expanded all throughout the world, which rejects the idea of "wrong sympathy" viewed as "the spirit of faction" leading to opposing or warring groups/societies adopting "partisan companies" (Mullan 27). This is a "feeling" experienced by the whole world which is inimical to Harley's type of sympathy, but which

gives it scope and reason for its most grandiloquent gestures (...). The world is not society; indeed, with respect to the attempts by philosophers and essayists in the eighteenth century to describe social relations, it is imagined as non-"society". "The World, I know, is selfish and looks for Virtues by which something may be gain'd to itself", wrote Mackenzie in a letter to Elisabeth Rose in 1771. The formula of his novels can be seen as one by which the "World" is distanced from any association with the actual society in which he lived and advanced himself (Mullan 122).

On the other hand, “the manly tone of reason” is softened in such a piece of writing. Sentimental fiction belongs to middle-class female readers who have a passionate heart, so the cliché goes. However, as Stephen Bending and Stephen Bygrave tell us (*Introduction* to *The Man of Feeling* 2001: xiii), the sentimental novel addressed the question of masculine representation in an age in which the heroic was gone. Harley’s effeminate self may stand for another variant of sentimental irony and wrong sympathy. “In culture at large, to “civilize” is also to “feminize”, and while this was on the one hand to be welcomed, on the other it ran the risk of leaving those males who constituted civilization effeminate and weak. So there is a paradox, in that while empire relies upon a traditional heroic masculinity, what it produces may be a feminized masculinity no longer capable of sustaining that empire” (Bending and Bygrave xiii). For instance, the Ghost, one of the two narrators of Harley’s story, mourns the sharp difference between the past “roar of mirth” (4) illustrated by Ben Silton, the baronet of Silton Hall who embodies a glorious, uncorrupted England, and the effeminate present in which the baronet’s place is “occupied “by my young lady’s favourite lap-dog covered with cambric handkerchief” and in which Harley was a species of “bashful animals” (4). Despite that, his secluded self is not autistic because his suffering needs an audience. “If there is a private world of “feeling”, the sensibility which for Harley is a touchstone of authenticity, that sensibility cannot be wholly divorced from the social world in which it is experienced” (Binding and Bygrave xviii).

The novel is in fact “a bunch of papers lacking art, but having something of nature” (4-5). The Ghost, an oddish, grave man, informs us that Harley’s “heart, uncorrupted by its ways, was ever warm in the cause of virtue and his friends” (4). Going to London to claim his inheritance, he meets several social types, including a beggar, a cardsharp, a misanthropist and a “benevolist”, and rescues a starving prostitute to her agonizing father. He also visits Bedlam, a madhouse full of patients seized with imaginative excess. He is a sentimental *picaresque* looking for sentimental adventures. Viewed from this perspective, the novel - apart from presenting sentimentalism as a “project for the depiction of virtue” (Mullan 122) - addresses an audience familiar with successive frames, fragmentariness, the discovered manuscript or the trope of physiognomy.

Upon meeting the misanthropist, the supposed “editor” intervenes to say that the person whose “pen” is responsible for the performance “seems to have caught some portion of the snarling spirit of the man he personates” (78). Declaring that “in short, man is an animal equally selfish and vain” (32), the misanthropist underlines two facets of his state of mind: on the one hand, affliction, since he rejects the corrupted world and, on the other, dissatisfaction to which he wants to put an end. If misanthropy can be/is a mode of perception, “an alter ego of feeling” (Mullan 121), then the novel’s aim is to point out that sensibility is unattainable because it is unworldly compared to misanthropy. To be sensible, coming back to Hume or Shaftesbury means to sympathise without any selfish advantage. Paradoxically, the novel creates an ambiguity translated as superior sensibility/refined sentiment and as inapplicability of these capacities.

Rescuing Miss Emily, the starving prostitute who tells him the story of her life, Harley regretfully tells her father that “the world is ever tyrannical; it warps our sorrows to edge them with keener affection. Let us not be slaves to the names it affixes to motive or to action; (...) considerations teach us to look beyond it”. (51)

This statement clearly shows Harley’s failure to be motivated because the author’s intention was to satirise individual response in social circumstances. He indulges himself into what I call autonomous hedonism, totally ignoring the social context. Harley’s reforming policy is promoted as self-regard, wrongly understood as sympathy for “he sees the world as himself and loves it accordingly” (Benedict 122). For example, his skill in physiognomy leads him to think that an elderly gentleman is virtuous and benevolent simply because he gives alms to an obtrusive beggar. However, his aunt’s words uttered when he was a child, “all’s not gold that glisters” (44) echoes in his mind when he learns that at an inn the stranger fleeces him at cards. In superficially reading society, Harley “exemplifies the naiveté and solipsism of sentimentalism” (Benedict 123), which mistakes self-regard for sympathy. Hesitating to reward a parasitic, deceitful fortune-teller who, instead of telling his own misfortunes, began to prophesy happiness to others, “virtue held back his arm:--but a milder from a younger sister of virtue’s, not so

severe as virtue, nor so serious as pity, smiled upon him: His fingers lost their compression” (22). Harley’s sentimental benevolence defeats virtue and turns itself into physical weakness, since he ignores the sad but real truth the fortune-teller tells: “every one is anxious to hear what they wish to believe” (21).

Coming back home without any inheritance and in love with Miss Walton whose “beneficence was unbounded” and whose “humanity was a feeling, not a principle (16), Harley dies of moral and social disgust, fever and frustrated love. Unable to reveal his love for Miss Walton, he dies because he cannot “socialise the feelings of benevolence” (Benedict 125) as she does. Mackenzie’s character’s faulty political agenda underlines the social and moral consequences of “unprincipled sentiment” (Benedict 125). His attempt to reform the morals and manners of a state “undergoing an alarming crisis” (57) triggered by general corruption is a failure because Harley cannot associate principled feeling with social engagement.

On the whole, Harley fails to be an impartial spectator of himself, as Adam Smith opines. Instead of becoming a self-commanded man, he remains a passive agent unable to interrogate his passions by considering the figure of the spectator (i.e. the surrounding world). Harley’s failed project of understanding human nature proves once again Hume’s ineffective sociability based on disinterested feeling and alludes to Smith’s “impartial spectator” that ought to turn the sentimental hero into a principled and controlled individual entitled to reconcile feeling and understanding, a dichotomy so much blasted by sentimental literature.

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