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Cloying Sentiments

Sentimentality occupies a strange place in our culture: apparently pervasive, superficially attractive, yet widely disparaged, despised and denounced. Sentimentality is sweetness, it seems. One critic complained of ‘the torrent of sentimentality that poured out of the media’s treacle well’ after Princess Diana’s death.¹ Others referred to a ‘sickly confection’² and ‘sugared sadness.’³ So it is hardly the sweetness of ‘sweetness and light’; rather, it is sweetness to excess, threatening nausea, sickness. And if the senses of smell and taste seem to be engaged here, so too does the sense of touch. As treacle, sentimentality is sticky, viscous. Sentimentality is *cloying*, and clinging: it can get onto you, into you; it can pollute you, melt your boundaries, threaten your integrity. If we succumb to temptation, and wallow in it, we become like hippos in a mudbath. ‘Faked feelings!’ protested D. H. Lawrence, denouncing sentimentality: ‘the world is all gummy with them.’⁴ This reminds one of Sartre’s discussion of the ontology of the slimy, the viscous, halfway between solid and liquid.⁵ It is ‘sticky baseness’, he writes; it is like a leech, ‘it draws me, it sucks at me’. I can sink in it, get lost in it, may even dissolve in it. Initially seductive, it quickly becomes repulsive, horrible. And it ‘transcends all distinctions between psychic and physical’: mind and body, thought and feeling, slide together. Then there is that sweetness again, now more openly gender-coded: it is ‘a sickly-sweet, feminine revenge ...’⁶ And, like Lawrence, he associates it with a kind of bad faith. Not only is sentimentality dangerously invasive, in a quasi-physical sense, but there is danger also in its dishonesty, in that it is not what it purports to be: its façade of genuine concern for the other, or grief over loss, is just that – a façade.

For its critics, then, sentimentality could be said to manifest the traps and temptations of everyday life, in condensed, almost corporeal form, a congealing flow that both drags us down and sticks us together, drugged by its syrupy sweetness. In this gluey flow, we are both immobilized and swept along, losing our individuality, all capacity to ‘think differently’ gone; in becoming part of

this glutinous mass, we also succumb to a state in which the public arena is swamped by the private world of irrational feeling. Sentimentality, one might say, is the everyday as *tacky*: both sticky and substandard, dragging us down, down and away from the illumination of light and reason.

‘Recreational grieving’ for the ‘people’s princess’?

In the recent British context, it is the death of Diana that has proved to be the most potent focus for these concerns. A massive investment of popular sentiment was apparent right from the start – and so was the strength of the reaction against it, by critics and intellectuals, denouncing not only the contagion of sentimentality but also what they saw as outbursts of mass hysteria, in the very virulence of their attack sometimes appearing to fall into the latter themselves. And the relation between popular emotion and the mass media was always a crucial issue. If the emotion on display was, as critics alleged, second-rate and second-hand, this either derived from, or was reinforced by, the media. Graham Little refers to the claims about manipulation, ‘the so-called grief being the product of the same tabloid minds that brought us the celebrity queen they lived off’;⁷ and quotes a journalist: ‘... it was largely a tabloid crowd and I was struck by the general kitsch of it ...’⁸ That there could be a circular process involved here is implied by the ambiguity of these quotes: the ‘tabloid minds’ in the first may well be the editors, but they could also be part of a ‘tabloid crowd’, who could in turn both be readers of the tabloid press and creators of the celebrities they read about, by their active willingness to participate in this creation: no public, no celebrity. Who is manipulating whom may not be so clear-cut; but, behind all this critical paranoia about ‘manipulation’, there could lie an accurate enough perception that involuntary participation in a ‘society of the spectacle’ may imply a deep substratum of assumptions, hopes, fantasies, emotions, a ‘structure of feeling’ that is drawn on, in a general and taken-for-granted way, by everyone – readers, viewers, editors and producers alike. This is what will need to be explored.

In this specific case, it is worth observing that Diana’s death took everyone by surprise: most institutions, newspapers and broadcasters (except for the BBC) had no contingency plan in place, and for at least the first few days it was ‘the people’ who set the pace; and through the subsequent development of events, the media reflected, as much as contributed to, the general mood.⁹ And we are reminded of a now-forgotten historical parallel, useful for comparison: the

death in childbirth of Princess Charlotte of Wales, the only child of the Prince Regent (soon to be George IV), in 1817. Perceived as pure and caring, hugely popular in contrast to her father and the rest of a royal family seen as arrogant and out-of-touch parasites, her death triggered an immediate powerful wave of communal mourning, with crowds turning out not merely in London but also in other towns and cities, business life suspended on the day of the funeral, and a huge market emerging for assorted memorabilia and stories. Yet this, of course, *preceded* the development of what we would conventionally call the 'mass media'; even the telegraph was some years away.¹⁰ It is hardly evidence of 'media manipulation', then, but would be perfectly compatible with the 'structure of feeling' emphasis outlined in the Introduction.¹¹ And, to return to Diana, it is worth remembering that there was also a degree of overt popular hostility to the media, and sometimes to Diana, too; Christie Davies documents the intriguing phenomenon of 'Diana jokes', which began circulating almost at once, and which he presents as a protest against 'the abrupt canonization of a well-meaning but rather ordinary person whom the press had previously derided, mocked, hounded and harassed'.¹²

This also raises the issue of Diana's relation to her audience: who, precisely, were 'the people' here? Clearly some groups were more affected than others, though the range of her appeal across different groups could make the diversity of mourners indeed look like 'the people'. Her own image, after all – a combination of rejection and marginalization on the one hand, and of active involvement in 'caring' on the other – made her a marketing dream. Her brother, Earl Spencer, referred to her affinity with 'the constituency of the rejected',¹³ and this seems very relevant to her appeal to gays, ethnic minorities, and the disabled and stigmatized. In the background here lies the suggestion that the excluded, in their amorphous, undifferentiated state, can embody a certain power, that 'what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central',¹⁴ and Diana emerges as a figure of mediation between this 'other' world and that of conventional power and politics, particularly in her readiness to display feeling herself. Little alludes to the suggestion that public figures should be seen to be 'emotionally representative', that they should 'turn into public emotion the private feelings shared by the community';¹⁵ and since she could apparently master the unusual skill of appearing to be both royal and 'ordinary', she could become 'a conduit between royalty and commoner, society and the individual ...'.¹⁶ She managed to appear both image and substance, celebrity and 'genuine person', an actor in the soap opera of real life. And her death was a jolt partly because it disturbed this precarious unity: it was simultaneously real, all

too real, yet also – inevitably – a media event. She was both the occasion for the sentimental flow, and the channel whereby it could connect people, drawing unwittingly on this deeper source, this amorphous mass of feeling, excluded yet potent. Dramas of rejection and identification, central to Diana's own life, were just as central to her relation to her own audience, testifying to the power of the vicarious both in distancing us, and in enabling us to draw together, in the contemporary world of spectacle and simulacrum.

In the light of this, we can return to the issue of emotion itself, the display of sentimental feeling that was such a feature of it all. It could indeed appear capricious: people in the crowds seemed to switch readily between being mourners and tourists, participants and observers. While this is a structural feature of life in a society where spectacle and sympathy have become enmeshed, almost an adaptive response, it could also be taken as further evidence that the display was superficial or insincere. After all, the vast majority of those who grieved had never met her. One of 'those who felt differently' referred to it as 'recreational grieving', adding that even if the grief was genuine, it was 'grief with the pain removed, grief-lite'.¹⁷ Another commentator claimed that the tears at Diana's lakeside shrine at Althorp seemed to be willed, produced artificially, evidence of emotional suggestibility. Now, apart from the fact that there is anyway plenty of cross-cultural evidence to suggest an element of cultural shaping and individual volition in any production of tears, however 'natural' they might seem, one might have thought that 'suggestibility' was precisely the point: only in the tradition of Western Protestant individualism is it assumed that grief should be purely personal and, indeed, preferably not really *displayed* at all, and that only close relations, the 'bereaved', should mourn; anything beyond is vulgar display, 'bad taste', the public sphere invaded by the private. On all this, a thoughtful comment by a mourner at the time is worth consideration: 'Diana told "me" (and many others) of her dreams and disappointments – and despair; my grandmother never did. So for whom should I really mourn?'¹⁸ The 'me' in quote marks is highly suggestive – clearly the writer was aware that there was a multiplicity of subjects here, each able to *feel* a special relationship with Diana. Like Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* distributing locks of her hair before dying, Diana, too, had shared herself, parcelled herself out; and if, in the age of vicarious identification, this occurs through emotional display in the media, it doesn't alter the fact that the basic pattern is still in place. The vicarious world of celebrity identification, with its own potential for distancing and fragmentation, for the expression of hopes, longings and anguish, can be, in its own way, just as real as the 'real'.

This will all need further exploration, but for now we will merely note that there could, anyway, be a trap in the condemnation of sentimentalism itself. The critic, who claims such skill in identifying self-indulgence and self-deceit in others, could fall victim to them himself. Impurity of motive can be infectious. Thus Deborah Knight argues that when the condemnation of sentimentality is self-congratulatory, so that one enjoys ‘the pleasure of feeling that one is the sort of person who recognizes the unworthiness of the sentimental’, then, since this response ‘masquerades as reasoned and reasonable, and thus conceals its potential to be both self-gratifying and self-deceiving, it is sentimentality of the most vicious sort.’¹⁹ Lawrence may fall foul of his own critique. Sedgwick concludes, in turn, that ‘antisentimentality can never be an adequate Other for “the sentimental”, but only a propellant for its contagious scissions and figurations.’²⁰ Indeed, we find that occupying positions within the conventional discourse of sentimentalism, whether for or against, may produce much abuse and scapegoating but rather limited insight.

Framing feeling: Dilemmas of popular culture

Knowing how to express emotion in socially acceptable forms, in a society which often downplays or disparages it, is difficult enough, after all. In a measured defence of the popular reaction at the time, Linda Grant argued that ‘wanting to express our feelings and having a voice for them are not the same thing ... Expressing emotions in words is one of life’s trickiest exercises. Get it wrong and you’re finished. This is why we develop rituals ...’²¹ In this everyday context, the ritual form words take is, in effect, the cliché, precisely because clichés are standardized and repetitive – which in turn, of course, renders them vulnerable to being dismissed as trivial, second-rate and derivative. And, of course, some of it inevitably arouses ridicule. The problem here is real enough: somehow, words and gestures never seem adequate; the piles of floral bouquets make their point, but, even as the piles rise higher, their inadequacy cries out all the more.

This repetitiveness of popular cultural forms can be further illustrated by another example – nearly contemporary – this time from the US. In 1994, Susan Smith drowned her two young sons in a South Carolina lake. There was an immediate outpouring of popular sympathy for the two boys; a shrine by the lakeshore (with teddy bears, flowers, photos, poems); and frequent use, in the poems, of the idea that God plucks ‘rosebuds’ to brighten up heaven. In her

discussion, Kirsten Gruesz points out that Smith's own confession used much the same language as that of the popular mourning, so that the same sentimental conventions appeared to govern both the act and the public response.²² As for the 'rosebuds,' the imagery may derive from a widely known poem by Longfellow (1839), 'The Reaper and the Flowers,' a staple of consolation literature; the suggestion is that Jesus needs the flowers, as they remind him of his time on earth:

And the mother gave, in tears and pain,
The flowers she most did love;
She knew she should find them all again
In the fields of light above.

Oh, not in cruelty, not in wrath,
The Reaper came that day;
'T was an angel visited the green earth,
And took the flowers away.

Directly addressing the reader is, of course, a well-known ploy in sentimental fiction, so I will now ask: how do you react to that, Reader? Are your tear-ducts engaged? Or are you closer, in spirit, to Oscar Wilde's reaction to a famous example in Dickens: 'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.' Or – like me – do you tend to veer indecisively between them? Emotional response need not be straightforward, after all. It is as though one reacts partly to one's own reaction, with a mixture of simultaneous fascination and revulsion. One gets caught up in it – that treacle again – but tries to escape it, too. One is embedded – partly, at least – but reflexively aware, even critical and self-critical.

This example also, of course, engages with a favourite scenario of sentimental reaction, not just in the form it takes, but the occasion for it: the death of children, who are, in this context, always coded as innocent and pure. Indeed, it is as though there is a surplus of purity here, so – particularly in the nineteenth century – the all-too-frequent death of children was appropriated culturally as a 'purification' of other aspects of the social order, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler shows in her study of the prevalence of photos of carefully posed dead children in the Victorian period, especially in the form of the post-mortem *carte de visite*: 'The family, as locus of love and feeling, constitutes itself sentimentally as an act of memorialization.'²³ In the case of two of the most famous literary examples – the deaths of Little Eva, and of Little Paul in *Dombey & Son* – we know the authors had recently suffered bereavements: in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe, her

infant son had died shortly before the novel was written, and it is clear that she was very distressed; and in the case of Charles Dickens, the death of his young sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, just before, had affected him deeply. In a letter, he promised not to shrink from speaking of her, but rather ‘to take a melancholy pleasure in recalling the times when we were all so happy’;²⁴ and ‘melancholy pleasure,’ an apparently paradoxical fusion of loss, desire and recall, of absence as presence is, as we shall see, central to sentimentalism. So: if it is the case, as most readers feel it to be, that these two novelistic deaths come over to us as highly sentimental, this merely emphasizes, perhaps, that major writers, too, have recourse to popular forms in articulating emotion that can, evidently, be deeply felt.

Grant’s argument is that the alternative to sentimentality in such situations is artistic originality, images that are fresh and unexpected, and ‘which force us to think and see in new ways while simultaneously inducing deep recognition, as if we have been told something about ourselves we have always known but has been unaccountably obscured.’ And one might add that if this culminates in modernism, which emphasizes the novelty of word and image at the expense of this ‘deep recognition,’ ultimately producing the eloquent silence that closes in around the words in a Beckett play, or in postmodernism, which gives this up in favour of a play on the garrulous promiscuity of words and meanings we always already recognize, then neither can ultimately deliver the goods. As Grant puts it: ‘What it comes down to is whether or not you prefer words to silence, each a failure in their own way.’²⁵ And here we can rejoin Diana; for if there were words – plenty of them – there was also silence, for long periods: the profound, resonant silence of the crowds at the funeral, as the cortège passed ...

It is surely significant that many of these examples of sentimentality and sentimental response involve the world of popular cultural forms.²⁶ ‘Weepies’ have constituted a very important strand in cinema since the earliest days of silent film; popular fiction is replete with sentimental situations; and music, particularly the tunes and lyrics of popular song, has perhaps been the most frequent precipitant of sentimental response. Here we might recall a line from Noël Coward’s *Private Lives* where Amanda falls prey to the strong feelings that well up as she catches the notes of an old popular tune being played by a band: ‘Strange how potent cheap music is.’ Indeed so; and just recently, listening to the radio, the first few lines of a song I had not heard since my youth arrested my attention and tore through my emotional defences: ‘Pale Hands I loved beside the Shalimar, / Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell? ...’ An old recording, in mono, with a distant-sounding male voice audible through the

old-fashioned accompaniment, with a slight hiss or crackle, singing what I later learnt was called 'Kashmiri Song': it was the fusion of the lines themselves, the aching tune, and the very process of transmission itself, that seemed to do it for me.

Naturally I did some research. This turns out to have been one of four poems 'from India' by Adela Nicolson (1865–1904), set to music as 'The Indian Love Lyrics' by Amy Woodforde-Finden (1860–1919), published in 1902, to considerable success. Both of them had spent some time in India, and had Indian Army connections. I could imagine the song being addressed by some British officer in India to an Indian girl he would love and leave; a more downmarket version of Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, perhaps, from the same era. In short, a long-obsolete Edwardian song with a somewhat dubious colonial pedigree – and learning all that does not, of course, affect the immediacy of my sentimental response in the slightest. Doubtless it must originally have been a record in my parents' collection, or for some reason it remained in my memory from some long-forgotten radio programme – and, either way, it was probably already on the way to oblivion. So the distance here, the distance of nostalgia, of 'loss remembered', is crucial too: nostalgia is, after all, a mode or aspect of the sentimental.

The comparison with Puccini raises an important issue. It is more acceptable for us to be affected sentimentally in this case, though it would probably be described as 'being moved'. Opera, after all, is Art, definitely at the high end of culture. Is it possible to distinguish the quality of the responses here? Characterizing one response as 'sentimental' and the other as 'being moved' may simply reflect one's greater degree of embarrassment in the one case in comparison to the other. In other words, someone from the appropriate social and educational background, exposed to opera and classical music from an early age, could easily find that the sentimental response could later kick in, for some of this material – but might well see this as being 'moved' by art, which is culturally encoded as an 'appropriate' response. In this sense, describing one's response as 'sentimental' is really to describe one's reaction *to* one's response, indicating a degree of unease, of critical distance, reinforcing the suggestion made above: 'tears came to my eyes, but I feel embarrassed by it and wish they hadn't'. The label becomes merely an exercise of internalized, taken-for-granted notions of taste.

However, writing 'merely' here is not to deny that, in another way, this is a very important dimension. After all, the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' taste carries a powerful identity charge: this is the sort of person I am, or want

to be seen as. It is a reminder of the civilizing process, whereby my public image, manifest in my choices in these matters, becomes a sign of my personal character, my quality as a person. But this has a further implication. In the absence of any other sufficient grounds for making these distinctions – any ‘rational’ basis for distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste – then my exercise of these cultural judgements has no rationale beyond the mere fact of the hold they have over me. In other words, I would have no good grounds for continuing to *disparage* a reaction as ‘sentimental’ (rather than merely describing it, in value-neutral language). And that would raise the issue of whether what remains of ‘sentimentality’ would continue to amount to a distinctive pattern of feeling, or whether it would dissolve back into some more generalized feeling, such as sympathy – with which it has had close historical links – thereby raising more general issues around the nature of feeling and emotion in relation to cultural life and the exercise of individual judgement. Any adequate account of the place of ‘the sentimental’ in modern culture must therefore be able to provide for both the appearance that ‘sentimentality’ is a distinctive category of feeling, and the rationale for the relative stigmatization that *often* accompanies it, but also for the possibility that this distinctiveness is illusory, that sentimentality may not ultimately be distinguishable from other feelings or aspects of feeling. We must try to outline or uncover a matrix, a ‘structure of feeling’ existing in a virtual state that can be realized in different cultural configurations and hence allows for these possibilities as sites of cultural controversy.

One central theme in all this – whether we take film, opera or popular song – is revealed both in the content, and in relation to listener or audience: the theme of loss, of separation. *Goodbye Dolly Gray*, a song forever associated with the First World War but actually originating a decade earlier, is both *about* separation and has itself come to signify separation and loss – in this case, the loss of a whole generation. And doubtless this repertoire has in turn been added to, by subsequent generations. With loss, as we’ve seen, goes nostalgia, a potent part of the sentimental brew. The songs of the 1960s girl groups, with their three-minute odes to lost or unrequited love, would feature on many lists. The Shangri-Las, in *Leader of the Pack*, add the ‘bad boy’ motif, the gang leader from the ‘wrong side of town’, killed in a motorcycle ‘accident’ when they were forced to split up ... Here, it is adolescent loss, all the more poignant in its transience. Love as such isn’t sentimental: it is the association with loss, separation, absence (actual, anticipated or remembered), that makes it so, that contributes the distance that is filled with the longing, the yearning, the nostalgia, the ache of desire.²⁷

And this brings us back to the Noël Coward quote. What makes ‘cheap’ music cheap, what makes it ‘common’, vulgar, ordinary, is that we don’t have to work at it, ‘suffer’ in acquiring an appreciation of it, as we are supposed to with ‘art’; we can just sing along, or get carried along. It is like relaxing among friends. And this relates to the theme of loss, too: friends can be ‘absent’ friends. Sooner or later, there is always separation, loss; indeed, there was, for each of us, right at the start of life. Community *involves* loss. Yet this need not contradict pleasure: the reaction to loss, insofar as it involves both sharing and acknowledgement, recognition, can be affirmative. We do not – normally – take pleasure in loss, pain or suffering as such, but we can take pleasure in the way we deal with them, the way we cope. As a final example of this mix, let us return to Grant, recalling the sentimental songs from her Jewish family background, songs like *Mein Yiddishe Mamma*, sung by Sophie Tucker, with its ‘tear-jerking rendition of all Jewish mothers as selfless, devoted angels who sacrificed everything for our children. In our hearts we knew the songs were rubbish, but they held within them some kind of truth ...’, some connection to ideals about motherhood:²⁸ here, loss becomes the self-sacrifice of love itself, in the simultaneous abjection and idealization of mother as motherhood.

Leaving to one side our ambivalence about sentimentality, let us return to that *initial* response, in terms of the immediacy of the feeling involved. Here, too, there could be grounds for disquiet. After all, what we encounter here is what Ed Tan and Nico Frijda call the ‘submission response’: tears of joy or grief ‘occur in situations that are experienced as overwhelming, as situations that one feels unable to control, to deal with, to retain one’s distance from’. The sentimental forces us to ‘yield to the overwhelming’,²⁹ and this helplessness is a problem for us; it does not conform to the ideal of the autonomous self, one in which ‘self-control’ is a virtue, or just a taken-for-granted presupposition of adult life. Although the nature and extent of this cultural emphasis on self-discipline and firm boundaries has varied at times over the last two or three centuries, this has not disturbed the importance of this in the structure of modern selfhood.

It can seem as though feeling, in its impact on us, features as a sort of undifferentiated field of force which then assaults us in concentrated form; it is likely to break out unpredictably, and to be difficult to control when it does. Once again, ‘mass hysteria’ seems to be an ever-present danger. Writing a few months after Diana’s death, Decca Aitkenhead identified a ‘darker wave of mob brutality’ whereby ‘the faintest whisper of a paedophile will bring crowds out, and have grandmothers screaming for castration’, so that ‘One minute Britain is a weepy nation clutching teddy bears, the next a snarling mob throwing stones’; and

her argument is that these are two sides of the same coin, a logical outcome of 'emotional politics' and irrational thought. Emotional currents swirl around, uncontrollably, seeking outlet, and producing 'phoney tribal attachments' in the process.³⁰ We may recall other examples of this ambivalent significance of emotional release, such as the case of a leading Nazi, Rudolf Hess, who is alleged to have wept at an opera performance put on by condemned Jewish prisoners during the Holocaust.³¹ And, in a sense, it is perfectly reasonable for this to fuel the criticisms of a 'culture of feeling': if indeed 'feeling' is to be presented as an alien, all-conquering force, then it can only be amoral in itself, resulting in political, cultural and individual consequences that can as easily be evil as the reverse. But the way this problem is set up in the first place should make us pause. The whole cultural rhetoric of 'self-restraint' and 'self-control' embodies and projects this sense of 'the body' as alien and dangerous, and 'feeling' as necessarily antithetical to reason and thought; and this helps to ground both the cultural distrust of feeling and the specific stigmatization of 'the sentimental' in the narrower sense.

The mere fact of 'losing control' can be a problem, then, and it is a *gendered* problem; there has been more tolerance for women to show feelings – particularly the sympathetic feelings – and succumb to them. Let us indeed linger with gender for a moment. This was clearly a factor in the reaction to Diana's death – there were more women mourners than men – and it divided the commentators: some feminists celebrated Diana as an iconic figure, others dissented. Claims about a 'feminisation' of British culture, protested Elizabeth Wilson, 'reaffirmed a reactionary stereotype of women as the only sex with tear ducts, the only ones who "care"'.³² Indeed, the historical data give other grounds for caution here, too. A 1994 issue of *Time* magazine carried an article, under the title 'Annals of Blubbering', listing occasions when George Bush (Senior) cried during his time of office as president. One or two such occasions involved the military, reminding us of George Washington's tearful resignation from his command in 1783, accompanied by an appropriately tearful response from his fellow officers. Thus did a 'foundational national moment' involve a 'fluid affective exchange between men', as Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler put it. Their book does indeed claim to establish that 'masculinity and sentimentality are mutually constitutive discursive formations'.³³ This would conventionally be seen as elite male bonding, whereby an elite differentiates itself by engaging in normally proscribed behaviour, though it is worth adding that the *form* the behaviour takes – the 'letting go' – is also a paradoxical mimicry of what would be (more) acceptable among women.

Away from elite military contexts, one can mention that in 1842 substantial numbers of American men could be found weeping in public, in front of large crowds, at meetings of the Washington Temperance Society, as they gave their alcohol abstention pledges.³⁴ Hendler goes so far as to argue that 'Washingtonianism was the first massively popular movement organized around the experience of sympathy'; the movement was built around 'a compulsively repeated primal scene of tearful, sympathetic identification with another *man's* suffering'.³⁵ Clearly this would be a classic example of the sentimental mode of a 'spectacle of sympathy'. One can tentatively suggest, then, that while sentimentality has indeed frequently been *seen* as a feminine and a feminizing attribute, and may frequently have been stigmatized on this basis, so that Luc Boltanski can claim, in his historical account, that it is 'above all the feminisation of sentiment which entails its discredit and the accusations of sentimentalism',³⁶ it has nevertheless at times been associated with *men*, and not *necessarily* in stigmatized contexts.³⁷ 'Sentimentality' is always a gendered label, but in ways that can complicate our understanding of gender itself.³⁸

All this suggests that questions about the meaning and constitution of the sentimental become deeply entwined with its historical construction and reception, to the point where one can wonder, again, whether there is anything 'there' at all, beyond the problematical label and the battles around its use. We can pursue this more directly through the work of an artist whose changing fortunes exemplify these issues, namely Murillo.

The eye of the beholder

Starting life in late seventeenth-century Seville, a city in severe economic decline, where large masses of people had become dependent on the charity of powerful Catholic institutions – a theme reflected in Murillo's own portrayals of beggar boys and street urchins – a trickle of Murillo's paintings penetrated the English art market where they were seen as fitting well enough into the relatively secular atmosphere of the eighteenth century, influencing some of the leading painters, notably Gainsborough. After the Peninsular War, the trickle became a flood, and by the middle of the nineteenth century Murillo was well known, through reproductions, even in the parlours of middle-class homes. But the signs of trouble were already present. Mass reproductions were of poor quality, and too often indiscriminately mixed up with inferior imitators; and some of his own works were still being confused with those of Velázquez. Both factors

counted against him with the art elite: as Velázquez's reputation rose, Murillo's declined, and has never recovered, even though reproductions of his work on cards, posters, even wallpaper, were still selling well even into the 1920s. But it is above all for one reason that this undoubtedly very skilful artist remains out in the cold: his alleged sentimentality.

A Murillo Madonna – and there are certainly plenty of them – has two immediately apparent features: a beauty that tends towards a certain sweetness; and a naturalism that makes it abundantly clear that, as with his genre portraits of children, they are based on real-life models, real women. As for the latter, it is rather unusual in religious painting, as it plays down the iconographic typification that has been taken as an essential requirement within the traditions of the ecclesiastical framework of sponsorship, in favour of expressions and gestures that situate the person in ways that bear the hallmark of what we have come to see as 'individual personality'. Whatever their traditional trappings, those Madonnas do not point us 'beyond', towards the transcendental; rather, they emphasize the manifestation of the transcendental in the here and now, in the embodied materiality of that specific person. This is not body transfigured by spirit, already rising towards the ethereal, but spirit as immanent in the very materiality of the body; it is the very definition of the modern person, the self 'in' the body. As Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt puts it, when Murillo was regarded in England as the greatest Spanish painter, it was because 'his religious narratives had an immediacy, a genre like quality, a feeling of everyday reality',³⁹ and Xanthe Brooke adds that in the eighteenth century his images appealed through the combination of sentiment and naturalism, 'perfectly adapted to a secularized Anglican audience'.⁴⁰ Murillo's art prefigures, as much as it embodies, this momentous shift, the onset of the modern conception of the individual; and it is this that makes possible his seamless incorporation in the structure of feeling we know as 'sensitivity'. And here, the combination of naturalism with sweetness is significant: these are young women who could be appropriate objects of love, and it was indeed the eighteenth century that put the modern ideal of love, as a secularization of spiritual love, individualized into an affective tie between two specific persons, on to the social and cultural agenda of the modern age.

If we move more specifically to the childhood scenes, the depictions of urchins and their games, and their (unsurprising) obsession with acquiring and consuming food, we can perhaps suggest that spiritualism is mediated into naturalism via purity, and purity is *not*, in this context, a matter of perfect behaviour, elevated thoughts and sexual abstinence. Rather, it is about a certain kind of naturalness, of 'innocence' coded as naturalness, again prefiguring a

staple of Enlightenment views of childhood: the Christ child thereby mediated, through naturalistic depiction, into images of real children. Of one of his paintings, Peter Cherry suggests that 'the infant Christ is no mere ideal cipher but seems endowed with an individual character',⁴¹ and his portrayals of familial domestic contentment reinforce this. And whereas, in the case of the Madonna, such 'innocence' is likely to be represented in terms of a certain sweetness, in the case of children this can well be complemented by playfulness, even mischievousness, without contradicting this allegorical residue of the sacred. These elements are present, for example, in *Invitation to a Game of Argolla*, one of the most widely reproduced of Murillo's images in the nineteenth century, turning up on postcards and wallpaper designs.

For all this to work, both the naturalism and the hint of the sacred have to be present together; yet the sacred, as manifest only in and through the innocence of the ordinary, the humdrum, the everyday, can simultaneously hint at its absence, at its withdrawal as a transcendent source of power or signification – and this, in turn, adds an element of nostalgia, a sense of 'homeliness' as an origin that may need to be precariously recreated in the permanent context of its own threatened disappearance. By the nineteenth century, then, for many of the more militant or avant-garde secularists, any religion is too much, and the sweetness and light a distraction from the imperatives of a hard-nosed realism, just as for Victorian evangelicalism the naturalism was too gritty, even vulgar, swamping the religious pretensions altogether. The possibility of viewing Murillo's paintings as revealing the historical, constitutive *components* of the sentimental, rather than as being 'sentimental' *in themselves*, is thus lost.

So far, then, one might say that there is plenty here to indicate the possibility of the sentimental, but nothing to *necessitate* invoking it. The very variation in the historical reception of these pictures suggests that if they can be read as sentimental, they can equally be read as only mildly so, or not as sentimental at all; commenting on Gainsborough's paintings that include children, Ann Bermingham contrasts 'the sweet, wistful sentiment' of the children with 'the more robust expressions' of Murillo's.⁴² Only an age hostile to *any* expression of sentiment would insist on denouncing Murillo's pictures as 'sentimental'. The label would be merely an indication of our unease with the display of feeling, nothing more. So far, then, sentimentalism is in effect constituted by our own denunciation – with the corollary that those who complain loudest about it are contributing most to spreading it.

We must, however, return to the sunny aspects, the sweetness – for these do indeed seem to be central to Murillo's art. There are, in particular, a lot of smiles.

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Invitation to a Game of Argolla* (c. 1670) London, Dulwich Art Gallery

Cherry writes, of the smile, that it has been 'long regarded as the most difficult expression to catch';⁴³ and there is certainly a case for arguing that Murillo catches it better than anyone. We would all like to believe that a spontaneous human smile is possible and that, as such, it would constitute a 'natural' signifier

of fundamental goodwill or goodness, hence manifesting an immediacy of feeling that can simultaneously count as morally expressive. As a test case for human sentiment, for spontaneous joy or pleasure with a hint of benevolence, the smile constitutes a grounding for the possibility of any community based on 'natural feeling'. A more cynical age, attuned to the possibility of deception and manipulation, to the artificial shaping of even the most apparently 'natural', may understandably distrust all this, even to the point of doubting its possibility, in which case Murillo's art becomes complicit with a pattern of assumptions readily dismissed as 'sentimental'. And we again encounter that assumption, a dual legacy of Romanticism and modernism, that art should involve the serious, the difficult, the challenging: it should be hard work, bracing, for artist and viewer alike. In the end, art revolves around forms of suffering. Murillo is too easy, too mired in 'superficial' emotions, in happiness and the sentimental. Murillo is a problem because he reflects the limitations of our own assumptions back at us, in a way that actually reinforces their hold.

A further point is made by Pérez Sánchez. He refers to the 'joyful, warm component' in Murillo's genre scenes, usually incorporating a laugh or a smile, and adds that they 'offer a vision that is like a snapshot of something about to happen whose meaning and subsequent unfolding is only implicit, so that it is our gaze that completes it'. Hence, he concludes, the 'joy of life which becomes contagious and engages the sympathy [affection] of the spectator'.⁴⁴ This is, indeed, a feature of many of these paintings: they seem to reach out to us, they seek to incorporate us in a relationship, a community, through a figure depicted as addressing us, or looking at us. This can incorporate – but is not reducible to – an invitation to sympathetic engagement in the narrower sense, invoking the kind of sympathy that could lead to making charitable donations. But, once again, this means that we are running up against another strong modernist dictum: that of the autonomy of the artwork, its self-contained self-sufficiency – in particular, in the strong hint of an emotional involvement at the level of demonstrative feeling, rather than interior appreciation, self-transformation by being 'moved' internally, which again conjures up the evil demon of the sentimental.

Hence, by the mid-nineteenth century, with sentimentality strongly established in Victorian culture, but also increasingly stigmatized, as vulgar, feminine, overflowing proper boundaries, and therefore endangering good taste and fine art, the scene was set for the increasing denigration of Murillo's work, just as this work forces us to confront the uncertainties of sentimentalism's own boundaries and the importance of the ascription of the label as a move in the

cultural politics of the modern age. The issues raised here – the relation between affective involvement and contemplative or reflexive detachment, and the further relation between sympathetic engagement and the sense of belonging – remain central to our understanding of the whole place of ‘sentiment’ both in art and in social life. But to pursue a discussion of sentimentalism itself, we need to plunge into what would more clearly count as key exemplars.

The sentimental at home

The sphere of the sentimental situates the person as ‘subject of affect’, encompassing intimate (romantic, familial, domestic) contacts and situations, and thereby setting up a dynamic of presence and absence, fullness and loss, linked through desire, hope, or anguish. To sentimentalize – however distant the object – is to ‘bring home’, bring into affective proximity to the subject. The ‘homely’ has a simultaneously spatial and affective sense; it refers to wherever I feel ‘at ease’, relaxed, off duty. Home is a place where the self spreads itself, unguarded; it is not unbounded, but its boundaries diffuse outwards; and the boundaries between the self and those persons or things felt to be closely related become more fluid and flexible. (This is, in effect, a less loaded version of the description given at the beginning of this chapter.) In this sense, the homely is fundamental to our experience of identity, of selfhood and relationship, but in this distinctively diffuse and unfocused way; it thereby exists as a contrast to an equally important mode of selfhood, more bracing, concentrated, focused, self-consciously rational, project-oriented.

To bring out these points, and some of their wider ramifications, we can take two classic texts of literary sentimentalism, roughly contemporary: from the more political end of the spectrum, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and the more apparently lightweight but, in its own way, just as moralistic *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens (1843). Both have not only been widely read on their own account, but have subsequently produced a long string of souvenirs, plays, assorted spectacles and films, becoming firmly embedded in the traditions of popular culture.⁴⁵ It is hardly surprising that the most intensive investments of the sentimental in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* involve recurrent arrivals at, returns to or simply being present in, the home;⁴⁶ and much the same is true of the domestic scenes in *A Christmas Carol*, very similar in tone.⁴⁷ Conversely, Uncle Tom’s arrival at the slave-owner Legree’s estate⁴⁸ – the ‘home’ that is the antithesis of a true home – exudes a similarly powerful but wholly negative affect, as indeed

does Scrooge's return, on Christmas Eve, to his 'gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard,' with their darkness and coldness reflecting the state of the soul of their owner.⁴⁹ Places exude feelings, just as surely as people experience them; but this is because 'place' and 'person' become indissolubly linked in the image and fantasy of the home, where even the most ordinary and menial tasks or objects can be ennobled and purified in the light of the sentimental.

What we encounter here, then, is what Lori Merish describes as 'a model of sentimental possession that both animates objects and constitutes sentimental subjects'.⁵⁰ And we can cite Stowe herself, who writes elsewhere of the way things in domestic spaces come to life and 'have a sort of human vitality in them'; they express 'homeliness'.⁵¹ Even the furniture comes alive. In the Quaker household, we encounter a rocking-chair, 'motherly and old, whose wide arms breathed hospitable invitation, seconded by the solicitations of its feather cushions'.⁵² This is a good example of what Merish appropriately christens 'sentimental animism'.⁵³ And this 'homeliness' is manifest in a sense of fecundity, of abundance, both of household commodities and of 'good feeling'. Now, food itself can be supremely expressive of all these domestic (and maternal) virtues, and the form of sentimental animism appropriate to food would seem to be that it evince its own need to be consumed. And so indeed it does. In the Quaker household, at breakfast time, there was 'good fellowship' everywhere, and 'the chicken and ham had a cheerful and joyous fizzle in the pan, as if they rather enjoyed being cooked than otherwise'.⁵⁴ In a parallel fashion, we find ourselves, in *A Christmas Carol*, among the happy but busy Christmas shoppers, in a fruit shop, where the apples, 'in the great compactness of their juicy persons' were 'urgently entreating and beseeching to be carried home in paper bags and eaten after dinner'. A few sentences later, in an intriguing formulation, we learn that 'the blended scents of tea and coffee were so grateful to the nose';⁵⁵ here, an uncommon usage of 'grateful' (whereby objects are 'pleasing') is subtly used to convey a hint of the more frequent usage, so that the objects again appear to take on animate attributes. And these particular objects demand to be *bought*, to be 'consumed' in the commercial sense before they can be 'consumed' organically. As we will see, sentimentalizing the market and marketing sentimentality can easily slide together.

In such environments, suggests Merish, one can encounter 'a deepening of sympathy through the revelation of mutual vulnerability and imperfection',⁵⁶ but this is not to deny that issues of conflict and power are raised. Drawing

on writings on domestic economy of the time, as well as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Lynn Wardley observes the 'middle-class preoccupation with the civilizing mother and the spirit of the house'; her own conclusion is that 'the aesthetics of sentiment survives in Stowe's fiction as a stratagem for redressing the asymmetries of cultural power'.⁵⁷ Exploring the relation between abolitionist political goals and domestic values, Sánchez-Eppler argues that the wider context of these 'asymmetries' makes the political project of sentimentalism inherently problematical. Abolitionist fiction purports to offer values based on domestic sentimentalism in order to critique slavery, but the problem is that 'these standards are implicated in the values and structures of authority and profit they seek to criticize'.⁵⁸ This is certainly true – how could it be otherwise? – but the outlines of an arena of oppositional sentimental values and practices are not hard to find. There is a recalcitrance about this arena; it is not easy to impose order on it, to subordinate it to conventionally rational imperatives. Attempting to do this can provoke resistance or a sense of futility – or both – and this is most notably apparent in Miss Ophelia's doomed efforts in the St Clare household, where the zone of the domestic is the zone both of the feminine and of the slave, and where Dinah's alternative dis/order proves more than a match for her.⁵⁹ This may be true more generally, in that this zone of 'sentimental autonomy' conveys a sense that 'affective efficiency' is more to do with habit, eclecticism, contingency and tolerance than with more obviously 'rationalist' values and practices. Wardley is right to imply that Stowe develops an implicit critique of the aesthetic practices of rational modernism and, as part of this, seeks 'to recuperate the decorative as an instrument of feminine influence'.⁶⁰

In order to clarify the moral imperatives of all this, it is worth returning to the issues raised in relation to consumerism and the market. In her discussion of Stowe, coming from a broadly Marxist perspective, Merish refers to a 'bourgeois discourse of sentimental proprietorship' and points to the 'humanizing exchanges between the material and the affectional that sentimental consumption both promises and promotes'.⁶¹ It certainly seems fair to point to homologies between domestic and wider public networks of circulation here. The conclusion drawn by Sánchez-Eppler, on the basis of her study of child mortuary photographs, seems very pertinent: 'If commodification exploits feelings to yield profit, it is equally possible for emotions to use the commercial as a means of expression and a form of circulation'.⁶² In *A Christmas Carol*, too, the whole language of sympathetic engagement with others is the language of consumption, of objects become commodities. Nevertheless, these parallels

must not be pushed too far, and we can bring out some of the tensions here by examining the case of Scrooge in a bit more depth.

Scrooge's problem is that he is too self-enclosed; he lacks 'spirit', embodied in the parallel worlds of circulating phantoms and circulating commodities that tie people together through gestures of sympathy. 'Spirit', claims Audrey Jaffe, thus names 'an inexhaustible fund of sympathetic capital'. And the manifestation of his 'cure', at the end, is that he is now, suddenly, everywhere, dispensing *bonhomie* and goodwill in all directions. 'The gift is a visible manifestation of spirit ...', as Jaffe puts it.⁶³ But 'gift' and 'capital' do not exist together quite so harmoniously. Gifts dispensed *as* gifts subtract from the circulation of money and capital used 'productively' to generate further capital, but thereby gain *moral* efficacy. After all, Marley's Ghost explains that if spirit 'goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death', when it is 'doomed to wander ... and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!'.⁶⁴ Hell is the eternal anguish of witnessing need that one could have helped relieve, and can no longer. The 'real' spirit is the spirit of the gift; the spirit of commodity circulation is only a pale reflection. Yet the text suggests the ultimate impossibility of emancipating good deeds from the nexus of commodity exchange that nevertheless *also* reinforces the need for such behaviour in the first place. The intensity of the sentimental vision of plenitude cannot displace its simultaneous insufficiency, just as it reinforces the impetus for the vision to be constantly replenished. And all this has a significant moral for sentimental homeliness: this is not about being self-contained, self-sufficient, complacent; it must be outward-looking, expansive, incorporative. There must always be room for guests, for good deeds, for a welcome to the needy other – as there always is, in both these texts, thus exhibiting some of the conditions under which a 'spectacle of sympathy' can emerge.

By contrast, we can throw further light on all this by considering the 'unhomely'. As remarked above, Legree's home is most definitely not homely. Indeed, he used it, like everything else, merely as an 'implement for money-making'. We also learn that Legree, 'like most godless and cruel men', was superstitious. To be 'godless' is still to inhabit the sacred, in its antithesis; it is by no means to escape it. And consequently, his home now becomes even more 'unhomely': 'ghostly legends were uncommonly rife, about this time, among the servants on Legree's place'. We have entered the realm of the uncanny, the unhomely in the homely. And there is a particular object, or token, that carries this symbolic load. When a scrap of paper is handed to him, out of it falls a 'long, shining curl of fair hair – hair which, like a living thing, twined itself

round Legree's fingers.' This lock of Little Eva's hair, which Tom had kept tied around his neck as one of his most treasured sentimental possessions – possessions of the kind the unsentimental Legree had thrown out as mere 'trifles' – and which was originally a gift of protective love, has now turned into something feared, into witchcraft, a malevolent power, a 'devilish thing': 'sentimental animism' returning with a vengeance ... And Legree is doubly cursed. This has happened before: a lock of his mother's hair, sent from her deathbed, too, had 'twined about his fingers.'⁶⁵ And he had burnt it. On its return, as the sentimental turned uncanny, devilish, its power is redoubled by his betrayal of Little Eva's gift to Tom. And it is *female* hair, as if female hair, shorn and distributed just before death, becomes alive, powerful or empowering, for good or evil.⁶⁶

What comes into focus here, then, is both the intense moralism of the sentimental universe, but also its perhaps unexpected kinship with the uncanny. While there are significant differences between these texts – *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is embedded in a deeply Christian world view, whereas *A Christmas Carol* manages to appear strikingly secular, even though the ghosts clearly imply an afterlife and some notion of hell – there is a similarity not only in the intensity of the moral imperative, but in the aesthetics of the imagination in both texts, manifest in their intensely visual quality, their pictorialism. And this is worth lingering over, as this pictorialism resonates with the spirit of the sentimental. In the former case, visions, dreams, premonitions, feature extensively – and these are not clearly differentiated, either from each other, or from the 'real'. They may, indeed, be experienced as intensely real. At the religious pole, for example, we find Tom, in his hour of deepest despair, being granted a vision of the face of Christ on the cross, a transfiguring experience which leaves him renewed and reinvigorated, able to go forward willingly to his fate. But we also find Eliza, in her secure retreat in the Quaker settlement, having a dream in which she and her child are reunited with her husband, only to find, on waking, that it was 'real': her husband is by her side.⁶⁷

In the other text, we encounter Scrooge looking through a window to find that the window both provides access to another, ghostly, reality – 'The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went' – and that it also *frames* that reality, captures it as picture. But earlier, Scrooge had himself been framed, fixed in a picture: we learn that the 'gruff old bell' of a nearby church was 'always peeping slyly down at Scrooge out of a Gothic window in the wall'.⁶⁸ If he subsequently lives in the world of representations provided by his ghostly escorts, he has already been positioned there anyway. So it is not surprising that Scrooge can 'lose' himself so readily

in the reality of the visions he is shown, for it is also true that he 'finds' himself there; the uncertain status of this 'other' world of representations does not in any way compromise, but rather facilitates, his dawning capacity for sympathetic engagement (as we saw earlier, in the mourner's relation to Diana). So Jaffe can argue that 'The reality Dickens re-presents is, thus, already encoded as spectacle'. And clearly it is a spectacle in which the spectres of Scrooge's own past play a crucial part: 'In several ways, then, the story ties the ability to sympathize with images to the restoring of a past self to presence.'⁶⁹ If this 'past self' is initially engaged in the register of the uncanny, it is ultimately recovered, comprehensively enough, in the sentimental.

Each of these scenes is also a tableau, a picture for the reader, transforming narrative scene into pictorial scenario. Both texts are full of these, reaching their most intense form in the household scenarios of domesticity, the sentimental theatre *par excellence*, where 'home' in all its manifestations is lovingly displayed before our eyes, the minutely detailed descriptions threatening to burst through or overflow their frames, in the excess of their plenitude. And in *A Christmas Carol* it is the ghosts themselves who organize the tableaux, of past, present and future, tableaux which gain so strong a hold on our imagination of the real that the intervening narrative flits by as quickly and spectrally as the ghosts do, on their wanderings. Although she is writing of the eighteenth century, particularly with reference to the painter Greuze, Emma Barker's definition of 'tableau' seems entirely appropriate here: 'a pictorial device that arrests time by isolating the key features of the narrative for contemplation ... the tableau's function is to condense the underlying emotional truth of a given situation and thereby allow it to discharge its full affective power.'⁷⁰

There is, indeed, a distinctive relation to the experience of time here. The passage of time, linear time, collapses into presence, experienced as intensified immediacy. This is most dramatically the case for Scrooge. His travels in time, into past, present and future, all involve travel to other places, sometimes far away, so it is already extraordinary that these supposedly take place over just three successive nights; yet we then learn that they actually take place, in 'real' time, in just *one* night. These phantasmatic experiences of the self occur out of time, just as they must return to it. And what they return to has been reconstructed: the future has opened out, freed from the endless oppressive repetitions of 'time enslaved'. So, for Scrooge, 'the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!'⁷¹ And for Eliza and George, time is freedom, too, to make their new life in Canada. Freedom from enslaved time is not freedom from all temporal repetitions and cycles; purposive projects, often centred on the

individual, will unavoidably be embedded in 'sentimental time', the presence of the 'eternal in the homely', as an essential – if often unacknowledged – presupposition of the modern cultural imaginary. And if this may involve elements of fantasy and illusion, so does the idea of freedom as the escape from all preconditions and constraints. Time flattened, past or future made vividly present, the time of image as picture, in the moment of the imaginative grasp, which can carry a dramatic affective power: this is sentimental time, loss resolved or denied, absence rendered into presence.

At this point, the sentimental and the uncanny can touch each other. The whole spectrum of visual experiences, from Scrooge's phantoms to Uncle Tom's visions, involve tableaux of the self, its projections, figurations and involvements; and these can as easily strike us as disturbing as redemptive. If the uncanny finds the unhomely in the homely, the sentimental will always find the homely in the unhomely; however distant, however 'other', anything can be sentimentalized. This is what can be both fascinating and disturbing about it. And just as the self can waver uncertainly in its status here, so can the objects it confronts in the world; the uncanny de-materialization of the subject goes hand in hand with an uncanny fetishism of the object, linked, in the domestic context, to a simultaneous sentimentalism.

The sentimental universe

An important part of the background of all this is the problematical history of modernity in its relation to the sacred, a history that can by no mean be seen simply as the decline and fall of the latter. The Christian religion has certainly proved readily compatible with the development of sentimentalism, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of course being the classic example. Something of the problems this can pose for the non-religious reader is brought out in the following passage from Jane Tompkins, describing the typological narrative typical of the novel. She suggests that truths:

can only be reembodyed, never discovered, because they are already revealed from the beginning. Therefore, what seem from a modernist point of view to be gross stereotypes in characterization and a needless proliferation of incident, are essential properties of a narrative aimed at demonstrating that human history is a continual re-enactment of the sacred drama of redemption ... its characters, like the figures in an allegory, do not change or develop, but reveal themselves in response to the demands of a situation.⁷²

Thus, everything has its place. Take the death of St Clare.⁷³ It is an accident, the result of a meaningless act of violence: he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet it is, also, *not* a meaningless accident. It is deeply expressive, of his character, and of his part in the unfolding drama of Tom's death and redemption. He has been well-intentioned, but effete, ineffectual; he was going to set Tom free, but hadn't got around to it – so Tom is doomed. Sentimentalism here reveals an expressive totality, in which object or event can be read as inherently, 'naturally', signifying. That this can also apply in more obviously secular contexts is suggested by Roland Barthes in his discussion of the lover. For the 'amorous subject', he writes, a fact about the beloved is transformed into a sign, and 'it is the sign, not the fact, which is consequential'.⁷⁴ And since, for someone outside the relationship, or for the non-sentimentalist generally, this link is necessarily going to appear arbitrary, rather than inherent and necessary, it invites 'corrosive irony', as Jonathan Culler puts it. In Culler's discussion, we find modernity characterized both by this ironic anti-sentimentalism while simultaneously 'the sacred has become practically submerged by the sentimental'.⁷⁵

Ordinary tasks, objects, situations: all can be invested with the aura whereby sacramental can become sentimental. At the same time, this transfiguration works in two directions, and the way these operate together takes us into the heart of the sentimental universe. There is the process of transcendence, purification, pointing outside and beyond the materiality of the body; but this is paradoxically located *in* the body, which is thereby simultaneously positioned as *abject*. In effect, this is a modern transformation of the Christian mystery of the Incarnation; and indeed, one could suggest that the survival and intermittent resurgence of religion in modernity may be as much a reflection of this purification/abjection dynamic in relation to the modern body as it is a source of it. Immersion in abjection reveals a fascination with the otherness of the body in the all-too-physical reality of flesh and pain. There is a bringing-near, a vicarious identification with the fundamental realities of the body from which the self normally exiles itself. So at this pole, sentimentalism is a mode of involvement in the very otherness of the unacceptable, abject self: distance-in-proximity, emotional involvement with boundaries that are threatened but not ultimately subverted. Sentimentalism thus involves abjection as projection into the other, vicarious identification with the normally proscribed dimensions of modern identity, the body in its materiality – from tears to pain – challenging cultural appropriation through its very excess. For Little Eva, suggests Athena Vrettos, 'there is a moral imperative to feel pain when confronted with pain and a hermeneutic imperative to suffer in relation to stories of suffering'.⁷⁶ And

Marianne Noble sees this as central to the promise of sentimentalism, which 'does not simply idealize the compassionate observation of another; it offers an intuitive and visceral understanding of the other's fear and anguish'.⁷⁷

There is, indeed, a history here, a recurrent history of the modern body, crucially positioned as the public face of the civilizing process, yet distrusted, controlled, always excessive, perpetually a threat to 'reason'. And this body as other, as rejected, can also be coded as maternal, the site of originating differentiation. In her thoughtful exploration of the relations between sentimentalism, modernism and feminism, Suzanne Clark points out that 'the process of delineating borders between an undifferentiated self and the maternal other is marked by horror and disgust',⁷⁸ linking this to the 'purification' of reason during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and subsequently. Here, Clark draws on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, as 'What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'⁷⁹ What is 'abjected' cannot simply be ejected; it remains uneasily present or nearby, threatening precarious boundaries, treacly ...

Out of the eighteenth century emerge both the abject and the sublime (only the latter being theorized explicitly at the time). These are, on the face of it, polar opposites that nonetheless can be seen to feed off each other; indeed, Kristeva claims that 'The abject is edged with the sublime'.⁸⁰ And this feeds into the sentimental. So, on the one hand, sentimental expression displays 'a rupture of narration by static tableaux evoking the melancholy and the sublime', as Clark puts it, while on the other it 'participates in the psychology of abjection'.⁸¹ Both the sublime and the sentimental can indeed be said to involve the 'submission response', the sense of being overwhelmed. Nevertheless, the differences here are just as important. While both the sublime and the sentimental entail proximity to the other, to ensure engagement, the sublime maximizes distance (proximity-in-distance), to encounter the other in all its immensity and majesty, the sentimental minimizes it (distance-in-proximity), to explore the other in its fellow-suffering. Both must maintain the boundaries of the self, to make the experience possible; but the sublime tests them, strengthens them, through a bracing, strenuous encounter, whereas sentimentalism relaxes them, seeking a 'letting go', an emptying-out of the self that threatens its boundaries. The adventures of the sublime, of the self in its integrity, give priority to imagination and reason; the sentimental is more body-focused, exploring imagination and feeling through emotional discharge. Although the shared 'submission response' complicates this, the sublime is more readily encoded as masculine, the sentimental, feminine.

In the light of all this, and discussing rationalist-oriented critiques, Clark makes the interesting claim that ‘Reasonable histories have produced the sentimental retroactively as the effect of their judgments about emotion in discourse, and their efforts to eject it.’⁸² We can perhaps place this alongside Kristeva’s suggestion that ‘I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* with the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*.’⁸³ Taken together – relating the abject to the sentimental – these could imply that abjection could be said to exist on two levels. At the first level, abjection is a response to the projection of self into the alienated body figured as other; at the second level, abjection responds to this first level of involvement by spitting out the complicit embodied self that – despite ‘itself’ – was ‘moved’ in the initial sentimental response. This second level, then, corresponds to the stigmatization of the sentimental that is, as we have seen, a powerful influence in modern culture, and hence in our own individual feelings and attitudes as well.

And then, the other pole, the purification and idealization of the self – in some cases, through death. We can recall Sedgwick’s claims for the sentimental potency of images of the crucified Christ in modern culture.⁸⁴ The person who looks at these images of the redemption of the abject body, the body transfigured even *in* its suffering, can engage emotionally with these images, become purified, redeemed, rendered ‘whole’ through this vicarious experience of suffering. The scenario of Tom’s vision dramatizes this, telescoping the process: Christ’s face first reveals pain and anguish, but then comes radiance (‘the sharp thorns became rays of glory’). This has a direct impact not only on Tom’s spirit, but its effects can also be *seen*, in his body: ‘All noticed the change in his appearance.’⁸⁵ And of course the Virgin Mary can be a potent focus for the love/loss dynamic, in her capacity as *mater dolorosa*, figuring our own losses, whether of mother or lover, with the added potential of nostalgia and its promise of vicarious resolution-in-recollection (in contrast to the return of an unresolved, unquiet past, in the uncanny).

To return to the abjection dimension: how is it manifested, what is its mark? The idea of the *wound* can be invoked here. For Noble, the ‘sentimental wound’ is ‘a bodily experience of anguish caused by identification with the pain of another’, and she reveals its workings in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Here, it implies a critique of disembodied, abstract notions of person and identity: knowledge comes *through* the body, not despite it. For example, Stowe appeals directly to her readers, reminding them of the anguish of separation, particularly from dead children; she ‘thrusts into readers’ pre-existing wounds’, ruthlessly seeking

to produce sympathetic feeling despite or across boundaries of gender, class and race.⁸⁶

For Barthes, sentimentality presents itself as a language of the body in its immediacy, as the wound of the suffering subject,⁸⁷ but it is in relation to photography that he develops these ideas most extensively. He explains that, as a spectator, 'I was interested in Photography only for "sentimental" reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound ...'. When a picture 'works', it pierces him like an arrow, and 'these marks, these wounds' are what makes the picture's appeal sentimental, personal to him, incommunicable – and, for him, it is particularly a lost picture of his mother that has had this effect. 'For you', he writes, addressing the reader – that sentimental gambit again – 'it would be nothing but an indifferent picture ... In it, for you, no wound.'⁸⁸ The wound opens up a gap in the self, a gap towards the other that promises a communication it may not be able to deliver. And this wound may well be a foundation of the 'culture of trauma', to be explored later, locking us together in communities of mutual inaccessibility, frantically trying to construct identity out of what separates us

Hints at another dynamic here are implied in Noble's observation that, at the climax of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 'wounding is so intimately linked with desire that torture seems to express longing and intensity of imagined pleasure more than it does literal physical agony.'⁸⁹ Eroticism is, after all, in some sense heir to the sacred, and the pleasures of vicarious identification with abjection as pain or suffering can take on darker hues. Masochism and sentimentalism are culturally and historically linked. One can point to a range of influences here: the construction of the body as alien, subordinate, dirty, in need of domination; the work ethic, asceticism, self-sacrifice; ethereal femininity as ideal, purified, abstracted from the body; and the resultant fantasies of martyrdom, fulfilment through suffering, the paradoxical quest to escape the body through bodily excess.⁹⁰ Both masochism and sentimentalism could be said to converge in a search for plenitude, for ecstatic union through pain. Some of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century exemplify Tompkins's claim that 'Learning to renounce her own desire is the sentimental heroine's vocation ...',⁹¹ such renunciation sliding readily into a yearning for submission to domination, with more than a hint of the sexual humiliation/pleasure dynamic of *The Story of O*.⁹² And, whether as fantasy or practice, this can of course readily enough swing over to the sadism pole. Nor can the reader escape getting enmeshed in this sado-masochistic potential. Leo Bersani argues that sympathetic involvement implies these illicit pleasures, hence 'the risk in all sympathetic projections: the pleasure

that accompanies them promotes a secret attachment to scenes of suffering or violence.⁹³ Whether this risk is actually or necessarily *realized* is an issue to return to; but it is certainly inherent, as risk, in the spectacle of sympathy.

On the one hand, then, we find these tableaux and the spectacles in which they are embedded – spectacles which imply a certain distance from the reader or viewer: ‘Spectacle depends on a distinction between vision and participation, a distance that produces desire in a spectator’, as Jaffe suggests.⁹⁴ Yet, on the other, the whole drift of sentimentalism seems to go against this. Solomon notes that, for its critics, sentimentalism is objectionable precisely because it ‘violates the reader’s sense of self by provoking these unwelcome emotional intrusions at an intensity that cannot be controlled.’⁹⁵ In her study of anti-slavery fiction, Sánchez-Eppler argues that:

Sentiment and feeling refer at once to emotion and to physical sensation, and in sentimental fiction these two versions of *sentire* blend as the eyes of readers take in the printed word and blur it with tears. Reading sentimental fiction is thus a bodily act, and the success of a story is gauged, in part, by its ability to translate words into pulse beats and sobs. This physicality of the reading experience 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.⁹⁶

This hints that the sentimental is the sensational mode of the spectacle of sympathy, a ‘contagion of tears’ washing over the distinction between the two bodies of text and reader. Barker concludes, in turn, that ‘The sentimental aesthetic is thus communicative, its fundamental aim being to dissolve the barriers between the work of art and the observing subject, between fiction and reality’. And, both for the Enlightenment tableau and for the nineteenth-century anti-slavery novels, there was intended to be a moral impetus to all this: ‘the tableau holds out the possibility that the entire human species can be united in virtue ... a perfect communion of innocent hearts,’⁹⁷ and, for Sánchez-Eppler, ‘The tears of the reader are pledged in these sentimental stories as a means of rescuing the bodies of slaves.’⁹⁸

There are two issues here: the relation between the work of art, or the situation, and the response of the spectator; and the implications of the latter for our sense of the moral and political implications of sentimentalism. As for the first: is the reader or observer a witness, or a protagonist? The resolution of this dilemma involves going decisively for the witness option, and suggesting that sentimentalism *intensifies* this sense of being a witness, and hence *involved*

as a witness, yet necessarily 'outside', and therefore unable to affect events. It does this by piling on the emotional pressure, hence *forcing* the witness to respond emotionally precisely because – given the distance – no other response is possible. It is as though sentimentalism pushes the witness position to the limit: any gap that remains – and there always *is* a gap – is excessive, and 'excess' is what flows in to bridge the unbridgeable. One distinctive way this is brought about is by direct authorial appeals (particularly frequent in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as has been seen). And if this works, it does so precisely through the vicarious identification-in-distance that has been discussed above ('how would you feel if ...?'); and hence the process whereby witness becomes – vicariously – protagonist.

As for the second issue, the 'unity in virtue' is only possible initially as a vicarious sense of community-through-witness; this immediacy of response, as passivity, necessarily produces its own gap, a momentary interregnum before there can be action, or the affirmation of moral commitment that could lead to it. This need not inhibit such action or commitment, but it may do so, as it opens up the possibility that the former could *substitute* for the latter, by producing its own self-satisfaction through the feeling of virtue itself. 'Feeling good' could provide its own sufficient motivation, subtly supplanting 'doing good'. This again revisits the terrain of earlier controversies around sentimentalism, and will necessitate a more thorough examination of the cultural politics of 'sympathy', in due course.

The concept of the vicarious has been used extensively here, and giving it some more explicit attention, particularly in relation to spectacle, may help clarify all this. For Sedgwick, sentimentality is not so much a distinctive subject matter as 'a structure of relation, typically one involving the author – or audience – relations of spectacle', and she argues that vicariousness is crucial to this.⁹⁹ Ellison observes that the term 'vicarious' itself has theological, political and psychological dimensions, in that it 'links the notion of the vicar, or surrogate (as in Christ the vicar) to long-distance, virtual, or figurative identifications between self and other'.¹⁰⁰ In elaborating these links between vicarious involvement and the audience-spectacle relation, Tan and Frijda argue that sentimentality 'tends to be associated with the response to cultural products rather than real-life situations', an interesting point that seems to be in some tension with a later comment, in the context of discussing sentimentality in film:

Film-elicited emotion ... consists largely of *witness emotions*. That is, the major affects in film viewing correspond to affects in daily life when we watch people

to which we relate in one way or another, who are involved in an emotional situation, but under conditions in which we cannot act, be acted upon, or otherwise participate in the situation except as onlookers. We are concerned about their fate, but have to wait for the outcomes.¹⁰¹

Perhaps, in the light of the significance of the vicarious, we can resolve this by suggesting that indeed we can, of course, respond to real-life situations, but we do so *as if* they were in some sense cultural products. And this sense of participation in a sentimental spectacle of vicarious involvement, where the 'involvement' involves an inherent distance and an impotence, an inability to act, is central not just to understanding the nature of the reaction to Diana's death, but to the fundamentals of spectacular sentimentality more widely. Thus, we can follow Howard's suggestion that 'The vicariousness so often criticized in sentimentality is here more neutrally seen as one of its structural elements.'¹⁰²

To conclude, we have seen that the sentimental seems to constitute an irreducible aspect of modern experience, a structure of feeling that can be defined through the simultaneous presence of the two poles of purification and transcendence, on the one hand, and pain and suffering, on the other, and that its manifestations of unconstrained feeling always render it liable to stigmatization and denunciation. In tracing out the ramifications of this, we have found the terrain to be criss-crossed by further tensions: between the visual, embodied in tableau, and narrative; between the spectral image and the material, embodied aspects of the self; and between the moral extremes, the melodrama, of good and evil. We have also seen that this terrain of the sentimental, which so intimately involves relations with the other, can itself only be approached through its relation to its own others, with which it overlaps and from which it is separated by fluctuating and uncertain boundaries: in particular, the abject, the uncanny and the sublime. Finally, the 'spectacle of sympathy' comes into focus as the framework through which there can be 'spectacular resolution' of these tensions – insofar as that is possible – just as it adds another element: that of an excess beyond representation, the affect that draws in the spectator, enforcing vicarious participation.

All this raises an important theme that has so far remained latent. Sentimentality, as a response, is characteristically precipitated by scenes of otherness, in relation to misfortune. This is not always true: it may be one's own sense of loss (or joy), in relation to oneself. Even here, though, it is as though it is the otherness to self that is involved, the imagined or remembered past, via

loss or 'recovered presence'. In order to explore this engagement with the other, involving the response of sympathy, we need to open up the discussion of the latter; and to do that most effectively, we need to go back in time. It is to this task that we now turn.