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Sensibility and Sympathy in the Theatre of Tears

Writing in 1790, Anne Radcliffe, the novelist of Gothic adventure fiction, offered this characterization of what she referred to as ‘the sentimental’, and which was also often referred to at the time as ‘sensibility’:

Conversation may be divided into two classes – the familiar and the sentimental. It is the province of the familiar, to diffuse cheerfulness and ease – to open the heart of man to man, and to beam a temperate sunshine upon the mind. – Nature and art must conspire to render us susceptible of the charms, and to qualify us for the practice of the second class of conversation ... To good sense, lively feeling, and natural delicacy of taste, must be united an expansion of mind, and a refinement of thought, which is the result of high cultivation ... In sentimental conversation, subjects interesting to the heart, and to the imagination, are brought forward; they are discussed in a kind of sportive way, with animation and refinement, and are never continued longer than politeness allows. Here fancy flourishes, – the sensibilities expand – and wit, guided by delicacy and embellished by taste – points to the heart.¹

While this is ostensibly ‘only’ about conversation, it actually reveals this as an embodiment of a whole culture of sensibility, and hints at some of the accompanying tensions. To cut through the terminological complexities implicit here, and referred to in the Introduction, we can use ‘sentimental’ both as the adjective that can accompany ‘sensibility’, and as a problem term that can hint at the presence of a province of feeling not always easily contained within the latter. What seems to be suggested in this piece, then, is that a more ‘cultivated’ or ‘refined’ sensibility grows out of, and presupposes, a basic framework of social life that already permits or implies an ‘open-hearted’ involvement with others. Indeed, ‘heart’ occurs three times here: in the second and third cases, what ‘interests’ the heart contributes to ‘expanding sensibilities’, a process which works hand-in-hand with ‘expansion of mind’. Sensibility is presented

as a fusion of nature and art: nature as feeling, as the untutored potential that can be realized through art – both art in the form of paintings and novels that can represent this in concentrated or idealized fashion, and as the ‘art of life’, its ‘cultivation’ as ‘taste’. We can say that as a structure of feeling, sensibility aspires to express nature, construed as ‘the natural’, a spontaneous language of gesture, passion and feeling; yet this goes hand in hand with an awareness that feeling, if it is to be expressed at all, necessarily calls on form, which must shape or structure it without betraying it, and the evident tension here is never really resolved, indeed it provides the energy that fuels the debates about the whole viability of ‘sensibility’ as a basis for a civilized social order. The expression of feeling needs to be artless if it is to be genuine, but such expression, in the very irreducibility of its element of cultural encoding, slides towards the artfulness of artifice.

As for nature transformed into an ‘art of life’, this seems here to involve a social framework of manners, of civility, manifested in a concern with performance and display. Feeling is always shaped and structured in some way. In practice then, writes Anne Vincent-Buffault, sensibility was ‘not an unmastered expression of the body, it presented itself rather like an *art de vivre* which one should know how to follow while avoiding dangerous excesses’.² The ideal of sensibility is clearly that it manages to be both expressive of community, of ‘open-hearted’ relationship, and of the person; since sensibility is supposed to manifest itself in a person’s ‘quality’, including the quality of interactions with others, so a social order of sensibility would manifest a combination of ‘good manners’ and benevolent behaviour towards the less fortunate.³ And just as the relation to the ‘suffering other’ is the litmus test of ‘real’ quality here, so it highlights the problem of integrity and form: is ‘demonstrating concern’ a matter of displaying ‘appropriate’ feeling, or something more? There is always a risk – exhaustively explored in eighteenth-century fiction and theatre – that the suffering other will come to exist merely as a means for demonstrating the purity of feeling of the man or woman of feeling, the sentimental subject. Colin Campbell points to ‘the tension which is bound to arise between being sensitive to the actual plight and real feelings of others, and being oneself susceptible to displays of intense emotion’;⁴ in effect, each of these can interfere with the other, a situation that constantly threatens to push sensibility into sentimentality, even though the latter merely displays the tension even more vividly. The alternative, which is to slide into restrained emotional display as mere propriety, ‘correct form’, threatens to lose the imperative to sensibility altogether.

'Sentimentalism', then, responds to the tension by intensifying it. The issue here, after all, is the public presentation of private feelings, and the significance attached to such inner states. Thus tears, for example, become indicators of 'heart', emotion, depth; they appear spontaneous, and this is how they 'ought' to be, in their cultural role as immediate manifestations of a person's 'sympathetic' quality; they signify 'letting go', being 'overwhelmed', dominance by the emotions, particularly those coded as 'uplifting'. And all this is, in turn, what exposes them to criticism for florid excess, indulgence, betrayal of true sensitivity, both because they involve a dangerous, irrational subordination to 'nature', *and* for the opposite reason – that they can be 'rehearsed', manipulated, not really spontaneous at all. The signified can become too 'natural', and the signifier too cultural, too artificial, a pretence rather than a true expression.

Yet these problems can be presented as their own – albeit always precarious – solution. If sensibility can only exist through display, if sympathy has to be shown as well as felt, suffering too exists as displayed, in 'scenes': in each case, there is an audience, hence spectators who are both at some distance yet are also *involved*. That this all entails an intense sense of a theatrical aspect of life, of life *as* theatre, is apparent enough in eighteenth-century texts. Hence the two, related dimensions of aesthetics come into their own here; for if 'sensibility' is itself an everyday aesthetic category, and raises issues of authenticity, of proximity, distance, and involvement, similarity and difference, in relation to the other, so these are raised also in the context of representation and narrative in art and literature – and the arts can be said to rehearse or anticipate, as much as reflect, this situation. This also implies a key role for the imagination. Feeling as response, and judgement as reflection, are brought into relation via imagination, indeed imagination *as* the simultaneous grasp and constitution of 'relation' itself, whether of body and mind, or self and other.

We can here rejoin sensibility itself: in summary, what could be said to be most distinctive about it, in this eighteenth-century context, is precisely that it expands the sense of 'feeling' to *incorporate* these other dimensions, giving the term a very broad sense – yet also raising the spectre of feeling in its narrower sense, the threat that it will sweep all before it, in turn provoking an 'othering' of the sentimental in a culture that nonetheless insistently produces and reproduces it, remaining insidiously attached to it.

But this is all very abstract. We will elucidate further by discussing two products of the time: a painting and a novel.

The grief of the prodigal son

Exhibited in 1778, we are told that 'all Paris' flocked to see the latest painting by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Le Fils puni*. It depicts the return of a prodigal son (doubtless the one shown being expelled from the domestic hearth in a picture a year earlier, *La Malédiction paternelle*) to the deathbed of his father, whose fate has, by implication, been brought about by grief at the son's wrongdoing.⁵ The son is shown entering the room, appropriately grief-stricken, and there he finds the women and children of the household in postures of intense emotional display. Indeed, the viewer today may find rather too much display. The woman on the far side of the bed, with her arm stretched forward over the dead man's head, does not actually look at him (or us); she might seem to be more concerned to express her emotion in dramatic form than with the ostensible object of her grief. Actually, *nobody* looks at the father, or indeed at anyone else; the intensity of the emotional displays, while marking them as public, through the appropriateness-to-excess of the displays themselves, also marks them as private, self-centred, with each participant locked paradoxically in this shared universe of private sorrow. What David Denby writes of the literature of the time would seem to be just as apposite here: 'sentimental texts bear witness to the semi-public process whereby a new private space is defined.'⁶

It is the body, through its demonstrative gestural economy, that has to bear the full weight of signification: no words seem to be spoken. The woman who brings in the returning son says it all with her outstretched arms, displaying the results of his sin; words would have nothing to add. Ostensibly conveying truth, words betray it; the body, in its immediacy, can alone express it, through the very inarticulacy of its gestures, its involuntary expressions of pain and pleasure. And if, in the conventions of the time, this is coded as 'natural', a foundation of human solidarity in pre-verbal sympathetic response, we confront not only the paradox of the constitution of the self-centred individual facing the other, but also the endless doubling of nature *as* convention, the gestural as manifesting 'aesthetic form' – that reliance on expressiveness through convention that is likely to seem, to us today, so very *un*-natural, histrionic and manipulative. Hence James Elkins can say of a Greuze that it is 'an utterly sincere painting, and at the same time it is utterly contrived.'⁷ Understanding how these opposed qualities can both be present reminds us of this key insight of sentimentalism: that feeling, however 'natural', stands in need of form, that it can only be manifested, shaped, through frames or conventions; and that any culture of sensibility that gives due weight to feeling and emotion both presupposes and

Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Le Fils puni* (1778) Paris, Musée du Louvre

reproduces an ‘aesthetics of community’ through which paintings and texts can communicate their meanings, and their cultural power.

These aesthetic forms can, of course, shift. If Greuze, so influential in the 1760s and 1770s, now seems so distant to us, this is partly because we perceive gestural form as taking the place of genuine emotion, rather than shaping it; and we thereby repeat the anti-sentimental reaction widespread in the period after Greuze, whereby ostentatious rejection can be accompanied by disavowed, unacknowledged continuities.⁸ In a recent scholarly re-examination, trying to recover a sense of the impact of this art, Emma Barker links his work to Enlightenment concerns with poverty, progress and plans for social reform, while suggesting that there are irresolvable tensions present: ‘Greuzian sentimentalism was not only uplifting and consolatory but also sombre and reflective in its consciousness of the gulf between the innocent world of the paintings and the corrupt one inhabited by the viewer’, so that ‘even as it seeks to restore unity and harmony, Greuzian sentimentalism inscribes the impossibility of its own project.’⁹ In the context of this specific painting, the ‘innocence’ can be taken to refer to the implicit moral simplicity of the scenario, and the spectator’s reaction,

just as the ‘corruption’ is *also* featured in the implicit narrative of the painting, as well as the world outside where the spectator is positioned; and this fracturing of *both* subject and object contributes to the sense that the corruption is not to be easily resolved, that there is no privileged position from which ‘unity’ can be ensured. Denby, too, alludes to this Enlightenment context, here pointing up the optimism: ‘an aesthetic feature (the foregrounding of non-linguistic forms of communication) parallels and supports the moralising project of establishing and celebrating sentiment as the basis of social solidarity.’¹⁰ In examining these claims – not only with regard to Greuze, but more generally – we will find that tensions around narrative, image and spectatorship in painting and theatre, and the relation of representation to loss (particularly loss of innocence), bring to a head problems of community, art and representation that suggest that sensibility, as a fundamental condition of social interaction, implies an ‘aesthetic community of loss’, the ramifications of which work their way through the subsequent development of both modernity as culture and modernism in the arts.

The art of tableau, the theatricality of culture

Dr Johnson suggested that sensibility was not just a mode of feeling but also of perception, ‘a way of seeing that found in ordinary scenes and events occasion for deep reflection.’¹¹ In exploring the relations between feeling, seeing and reflection, the ethics and aesthetics of sentimentalism, it is useful to consider the significance of the ‘tableau’, which will in turn have ramifications for our notions of community and spectacle. The concept itself was central to the theoretical and critical writings of the Enlightenment philosopher Diderot, at the time, and has been taken up more recently by the art historian and critic Michael Fried. It refers to a scenario of emotional display, characteristically depicting an encounter between innocence and misfortune (though guilt and punishment can also feature), generally in a familial or domestic context. As such, depictions of tableaux – or tableau *as* picture – were particularly significant in relation to painting and theatre, though resonances in literature are not hard to find.¹² Clearly *Le Fils puni* would count as an exemplary instance.

Diderot develops the concept, in the context of theatre, by making a key distinction: ‘An unexpected incident that happens in the course of the action and that suddenly changes the situation of the characters is a *coup de théâtre*. An arrangement of these characters on the stage, so natural and so true to life

that, faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on canvas, is a *tableau*.¹³ The former – the arena of plot and narrative – needs to be complemented by the latter, potentially more profound and moving. In Fried's words, Diderot was calling for 'expressive movement or stillness as opposed to mere proliferation of incident', an emphasis on the self-sufficiency, unity and affective potential of the object of the gaze; hence, the challenge is 'to reach the beholder's soul by way of his eyes'.¹⁴ For Carolyn Williams, writing of the subsequent adventures of the tableau in nineteenth-century drama and culture generally, 'the tableau interrupts and punctuates the ongoing action with its silent, composed stillness – calling for the audience to be likewise arrested yet all the while to be actively feeling and interpreting'.¹⁵ There is a necessary element of tension here, yet of course tableau and narrative are – and have to be – interdependent: every picture tells a story, we say, but every story also implies arrested moments of descriptive, reflective picturing. In freezing narrative, suspending time in the immobility of the moment, the effect of tableau is that 'the set of forces which the narrative has brought together in a particular moment may be allowed to discharge their full affective power', as Denby puts it.¹⁶ The tableau could be said to repeat but also to concentrate the narrative, as synecdoche. It 'rises out of the action, yet detaches from it to turn around and function as commentary on it', adds Williams; yet the sense of repetition and/as intensification remains, for the tableau is 'critically double: terrifying and sentimental, otherworldly and domestic, extravagant and realistic, outward and inward turning'.¹⁷ If tableau is the moment of reflexivity in the arts it could also go beyond this: the reflexive moment, aiming to grasp the whole, is projected into tableau, as figural intensification.

All this has wide-ranging implications, not least for our concept and experience of selfhood. Using 'soul' in the new, Enlightenment sense as the 'inner principle' of selfhood, Diderot writes that 'Our soul is a moving tableau which we depict unceasingly; we spend much time trying to render it faithfully, but it exists as a whole and all at once. The mind does not proceed one step at a time as does expression'.¹⁸ Fried thus suggests that he found in the tableau 'an external, "objective" equivalent for his own sense of himself as an integral yet continuously changing being'.¹⁹ In effect, there is a homology here between narrative and tableau in the arts and the reflexive development of self-identity, one that reveals a shared tension. Just as any attempt by the self to picture its 'essence', to imagine ('image') its fundamental character, is bound in some degree to impose, rather than find, the unity it seeks, losing as it must the very sense of its own unfolding, so too the image of unified wholeness projected in

the tableau cannot summarize, without remainder, the unfolding of a narrative that is, also, necessarily, ongoing, facing the future as well as recalling the past. The timeless present, and experience as/of succession, remain mutually recalcitrant; and thus the intensity of the reflexive grasp is as much evidence of its failure, of its own absence to itself, as it is of testimony to its success.²⁰

This sense in which the power of tableau lies in its ability to convey a sense of wholeness requires further elaboration. Returning to Diderot's figuration of selfhood as soul, one could say that manifesting the soul *as* a whole requires tableau, a pictorial image, while narrative can only display the doings of the soul in time. And here the imagination is centrally involved, in that what is entailed is the production of an 'ideal whole' rather than – or as much as – finding a 'real' one. *Framing* is critical here, isolating the scenario against its background, fixing it *as* whole – indeed, the 'whole' may be no more than the effect of this framing, and the 'composition' thereby made possible. The tableau, suggests Barthes, is 'a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness ...'. In its self-sufficiency, the tableau has something to say and knows how to say it: it is 'reflexive, moving and conscious of the channels of emotion'.²¹ Yet one might add that this very fact necessitates an 'other place' from which it speaks, precisely through the reflexive move whereby it tries and fails to project itself in pure transparency, and which results in the concentration of meaning in parts of the tableau, objects within it, in the process of figuration that is also a fetishization, and testifies to the presence of absence even in the heart of the dramatic unity of the tableau. And when Diderot describes tableau as 'a whole contained under a single point of view',²² this perspectivism invites one to ask: *which* or *whose* point of view? Debates around 'reception aesthetics' loom ... If – to anticipate the argument somewhat – we are present here not only at the birth of the modern subject but of modernism in the arts, we can see that the 'self-contained' nature of the tableau, its pretension to autonomy, is to some degree forced, artificial, its necessary hinterland thereby disavowed.

Here we can return to the dramatic 'excess' that seems to be present, both in the tableau and in the reaction to it. The 'excess' of the tableau has the effect of reinforcing its autonomy, its self-integration, by providing a dimension of rhetoric, dramatizing its unity in and as passion, with specific gestures, expressions and flourishes, and indeed objects – notably tears – acting as signs and triggers, carrying this affirmation of meaning as emotional involvement and display. In this sense, the tableau is always inseparable from melodrama, indeed can be positioned as an originating instance of it; Diderot himself drew attention

to links between the family misfortune scenario and melodrama, a connection that has continued through to Hollywood and beyond.²³ Susan Manning indeed argues that we can regard sensibility as ‘the repressed face of melodrama.’²⁴

This melodrama is then, in part, a dramatization of the autonomy of form itself, insulating its content, proclaiming the autonomy of the artwork, an autonomy that is never sufficiently manifest in itself, hence can only ever be excessive, the ‘excess’ serving to define its boundary through exaggeration – and thereby, in a sense, *also* overflowing the boundary. And this also produces or confirms the spectatorial involvement, in reacting to the excess, the gap between spectator and object simultaneously affirmed and denied. But we can see more in play here. If the tableau’s relation to its hinterland is problematical – denying it as it proclaims its wholeness and autonomy – this is analogous to the situation of the self in relation to *its* hinterland: self-identity in its public face calls for excess, whereby self-autonomy can be both manifested and defined. Pointing to what are often seen as the distortions induced by sentimentalism, Campbell indeed suggests that ‘the intensity of expression tends to be somewhat in excess of that which the occasion would “naturally” demand.’²⁵ Leaving aside the obvious problem here – can we be sure of what is ‘naturally’ demanded in these cases? – we can see how this would come about. When a felt emotion is in turn felt to be a significant manifestation of self, and likely to be so regarded by others, it calls for display, for public form – otherwise how can anyone know it is there? And given that emotions are to an extent *cultivated*, and part of an inter-subjective culture of the vicarious, there may be a tendency towards inflation of expression, so as to enhance the ‘reality-effect’ – which in turn means that the degree of emotional expressiveness can become a likely source of conflict, and subject to fashion (as in the denunciations of ‘sentimentalism’, then²⁶ and now). The drama of self-projection can slide readily enough into melodrama.

The relation of tableau to a spectator or audience is indeed crucial here, and exploring it will help clarify the nature and problems of this ‘autonomy’. Diderot writes, provocatively: ‘in a dramatic representation, the beholder is no more to be taken into account than if he did not exist.’²⁷ So, in the context of Greuze, Fried suggests that what is usually seen, today, as ‘appealing most egregiously to the beholder functioned largely to neutralize the latter’s presence’, and it was precisely this attempt to portray the scene in its own self-sufficiency, to refuse to allow the audience ‘to impinge upon the absorbed consciousness of his figures’, that led the audience to be transfixed by – and before – the spectacle. The emotionalism is not there to seduce the audience, as it were, but to exclude it, in the interest of the self-contained pictorialism of the scene *as art* – its

possible *effect* being all the more intense. In short, Fried suggests that what Diderot is calling for, and may be exemplified in Greuze, was 'the creation of a new sort of object – the fully realized tableau – and the constitution of a new sort of beholder – a new "subject" – whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his absence from the scene of representation'. And we encounter 'an implicit apprehension of the beholder's alienation from the objects of his beholding (and therefore, in a manner of speaking, from himself, both in his capacity as beholder and as a potential object of beholding for others)'.²⁸ One might indeed postulate a formal equivalence of the autonomy of the artwork, its imaginative unity, and the self and its own autonomy (and the sense in which both are 'imaginary' as well as imaginative).

Barthes makes the ambitious claim that 'the whole of Diderot's aesthetics rests on the identification of theatrical scene and pictorial tableau', aligning the term 'theatrical' with Diderot's sense of a new aesthetic of the theatre.²⁹ If we take the case of the stage, we can indeed recall Diderot's 'paradox of acting', glossed by Jay Caplan as the claim that 'what is proper to a great actor is that nothing is properly his'.³⁰ He *becomes* the character he acts. An actor's stage presence is entirely 'other', and an actor should manifest no awareness of this fact, or of the presence of an audience, since both of these would endanger the self-absorption in the role, in the character portrayed, that makes it so 'real' for the spectator. And hence the apparent paradox that it is when characters are most self-absorbed, locked in their own emotional responses, that they are of most interest, and the beholder's emotions and imagination are most engaged. For the beholder, being excluded *and* being absorbed go together.

In exploring Diderot's own writings, Caplan adds a further, decidedly more controversial twist, arguing that 'the absence of the beholder is so crucial to the structure ... that we must speak of the beholder as a character in it'.³¹ Here, it is useful to introduce Diderot's claim that virtue is 'a form of self-sacrifice'³² whereby one has to give up the time of one's self-interested projects in order to acknowledge duties to others.³³ In the light of this, Caplan argues that 'The beholder's tear repeats the sacrifices that the represented characters have made and also represents the beholder's own sacrifice'; hence, tears '*relate* a sacrifice, *repeat* it, and *represent* or *signal* it'.³⁴ It is as though the beholder becomes a vicarious member of the family whose 'loss' is represented in the tableau (in whatever form it may take): author, character, beholder, all become substitutable, superimposed, and hence their implicit dialogue makes the tableau, just as they simultaneously become its topic. Citing Richardson, Diderot exhorts us: 'Come, we shall cry together over the unhappy characters of his fictions, and we

shall say, "If fate should overwhelm us, at least decent folk will cry over us."³⁵ The community of tableau is the community of tears, just as 'Virtue requires a sacrificial representation – it requires a tableau'. And the beholder? In an important passage, Caplan writes of 'a desire that this loss in the family that was at the origin of the tableau be mourned and compensated for by the beholder whom the tableau summons forth', and that the family would thereby be reborn at another level: 'The family's fragmentation would once again be made whole at the level of the family of Man.' Yet representation and beholder can never completely overlap: 'A desire for wholeness never alters the fact that the tableau is always incomplete.'³⁶ Aesthetic unification is bound to fail, it cannot heal the absence in the real; all that is possible is a 'momentary unity in tears', as Jochen Schulte-Sasse puts it.

This whole line of argument has, in effect, led us naturally into what can be called the 'compensation model', so influential in interpretations of the position of art in modern culture. If fragmentation and conflict in the modern world deny us this longed-for sense of harmony, perhaps art can supply it, if only by keeping the dream alive. Hence it is not by chance that a newly separate aesthetic realm coincides with 'the emergence of a new desire for intimacy and a valorization of human sensibility and sympathy', in Schulte-Sasse's words. Unfolding in time, the modern experience produces 'an infinite cycle of desire and partial fulfilment that can never be arrested in a timeless moment of fulfilled presence', and this tension between desire and its adequate realization leads to 'an imaginary sublation of that tension in the institution of art'.³⁷ Given that this sense of absence or loss, geared to a notion of progress through amelioration or revolution, also drives the Enlightenment project, Barker usefully summarizes all this by suggesting that the historical interest of Greuzian sentimentalism derives 'from its position on the cusp between an Enlightenment model of art as useful and potentially reformist and an autonomy model that suppresses art's emancipatory potential by offering a purely aesthetic compensation' for the ills of the modern world.³⁸

There are clearly insights here, but this overall approach is open to serious criticism. Art as 'imaginary sublation' is – among others – the standard Freudian or Marxist view, reducing art to function, to the satisfaction of need, whether individual or social. To dismiss the power of art – or culture generally – to move people as mere 'compensation' is always, ultimately, a form of reductionism, however sophisticated the argument's garb. This all reflects – rather than analyses – too much of the governing rationalist and utilitarian biases *within* the modern way of looking at the place of culture; and this would be

true both of the narrower version of this approach, keeping alive the hope embodied in 'high' art, or the version that emphasizes that art, too, must inevitably succumb to market pressures, becoming 'merely' another aspect of consumerism. Either way, culture becomes functionally determined, in relation to an 'other', whether psyche or economy, postulated as external, needy and determinant – a perspective that hardly goes beyond an elaborate redescription of those alienated aspects of modern experience it purports to explain or understand.

With this in mind, let us return to the tableau, and try a different tack. Caplan himself refers to the fact that it requires the beholder to 'bear witness to a spectacle'. Clearly there is a hint here that if the tableau is in some ways a founding moment of modernism, celebrating the self-absorption not just of the figures depicted but of the artwork itself, firmly positioning the beholder *outside* it, as spectator, this also suggests that such a work, *in* its very distance, can join the world of other visual spectacles, even those it might not otherwise resemble. In effect, we return to the issue of the disavowed hinterland, developing a particular aspect of this. Whatever the distinctive forms and attributes of modernism, it is also true that it cannot escape the world of spectacle; and if tableau emerges as significant here, it is because it can prefigure modernism while remaining embedded within the spectacle of sympathy.

Now, Caplan does seem to position the beholder rather too close to the tableau, at some risk of losing Fried's original insight. The beholder is *witnessing*, not 'sublating' or 'compensating'. Nor is it the case that the beholder either wants to be or can be a participant, at least not in any reasonably straightforward sense. This claim is not necessary to explain the emotional reaction, the fact that the beholder reacts *as if* a participant. Rather, tableau as self-absorption corresponds to – reflects and encourages – the beholder's self-focused sense of the immediacy of his own emotional response to situations, of 'other' situations as *analogous* to those of self, as *imaginable* in terms of his own possible experiences. The relation between them and their loss or lack is analogous to the relation between the beholder and his own loss or lack, and it is this superimposed analogy that permits the underlying sense of 'involvement', without ever denying the difference or distance that makes it possible. Any sense of 'community' here is as much to do with absence as with presence; community does not exist as a potentially real 'resolution' of this absence, or a compensation, either in the aesthetic realm now or in some possible real future. *Pace* Caplan, there is no question of the family being 'reconstituted', at this or any other level. The 'perfect family' may exist as sentimental presupposition or aspiration, either

in the 'as if' of the vicarious or a past realm of (partly imagined) nostalgia, and *this* absence is quite sufficient to generate emotion, whether for painter or beholder. The 'involvement' of the latter is thus 'real enough', but still distant, still exiled from the scenario itself. What is involved here is aesthetic *realization*, not a *resolution* of anything. There is no satisfyingly teleological closure here. And Diderot's claim that 'self-sacrifice performed in imagination creates a predisposition to sacrifice ourselves in reality'³⁹ may or may not be over-optimistic, but has the virtue of recognizing the power of imaginative involvement in, and difference from, the plight of the other. But this, in turn, raises broader issues and tensions that can be pursued if we turn to the second case study, the novel.

The tribulations of Emma

One of that courageous band of 'Jacobin feminists' around Mary Wollstonecraft in the 1790s, Mary Hays, published *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* in 1796, at a time when the reaction in Britain against the 'excesses' of the French Revolution was increasingly being used to block any kind of progressive Enlightenment reform, inaugurating a period of conservatism that would indeed last for the rest of her long life. At best a minor success in its own time, the novel – along with its author – has long been forgotten, although its republication two centuries later suggests a revival of interest.⁴⁰ A genre-defying mix of fiction, epistle, autobiography, political polemic and philosophical disputation, the relatively slim volume manages to encompass a passionate tale of the miseries of obsessive desire and unrequited love; a rational analysis of the social and cultural conditioning that makes women, in particular, the victims of such misfortune; and a reflection on the adequacy of her own account, showing how easily reason can become mere rationalization when disconnected from the springs of feeling which lie ultimately in the bonds of sympathy between us. These springs have to be accessed through the links between feeling and imagination that are embodied in literature and art, and that produce the self itself as a work of 'fiction', with the accompanying dangers of that term. There is quite a lot going on, then, beneath a veneer that can easily lead it to be dismissed – yet again – as 'mere sentimentalism'.⁴¹

The relation between disclosure and the truth of sentiment is an important theme in the novel, and can lead us towards both the author's critique of Enlightenment and her underlying assumptions about sympathy.⁴² Disclosure becomes an index of sensibility, proof of integrity: 'the sensible heart yearns to

disclose itself', Emma tells Augustus. Such sincerity is 'artless'; it is not shaped in any way, at least not by any deliberate, conscious interference, so no question of strategy, or possible deceitfulness, can arise in relation to it. There is also the implication that it is not distorted by imagination or passion. And this has an immediate corollary, namely that the other, to whom the heart is thus disclosed, cannot be unaffected by this revelation, on pain of itself being revealed as a being incapable of 'sensibility' at all. The other, then – 'a mind with which my own proudly claimed kindred' – is necessarily embedded in this sympathetic connectivity, and hence must react in a way consistent with that.⁴³ Reinforcing this, Emma's later willingness to accept that she had been wrong about Augustus cannot be allowed to reflect on this basic logic: she blames the imagination, or, alternatively, his own lack of openness, since 'concealment' necessarily impedes the flow of sensible revelation.

Can this pure, autonomous, immediate revelation of sensibility, both index or sign and the reality that is thus manifested or designated, perform the task required of it? For Emma, it can seem straightforward enough: 'genuine effusions of the heart and mind' are 'easily' distinguished from the 'vain ostentation' of 'lip deep' sentiment, because the latter leaves no emotional trace, either in its own manifestation or in its effect on the other. Depth is integrity: mere surface is not enough; it can be 'art', factitious or superficial. This indeed seems to imply a critique of sensibility as *mere* taste, good form, since such 'form' can be empty or deceitful. The 'genuine' effusions are described, in this passage, as 'energetic', hence darting from person to person, and it is this quality that seems to differentiate them. But in another letter, she refers to the 'mild current of gentle and genial sympathies', and indeed now describes the opposite as a 'destructive torrent',⁴⁴ so it seems that the forcefulness of their manifestation cannot suffice to distinguish them. Passion has the power to sweep all before it, as Emma knows all too well. So we are forced back onto the idea of 'artlessness'. But this, too, presents problems. Since it is clear that distortions due to the imagination, particularly linked to passion, can and do occur, can they be so easily detected and avoided? Simulation is the stock in trade of the imagination, after all. And Emma herself, trying to wriggle out of the charge of hypocrisy – she has, after all, partially concealed the truth about her relationship with Augustus from her correspondent, Mr Francis – regrets that she cannot disclose the full truth, she can only 'paint' it, portray it, indirectly; and if this is so, how can we be sure that such 'painting', necessarily 'artful', may not in fact be frequent in such expressions of sensibility, indeed may be *inherent* in sensibility insofar as it is expressed, exists *as* expression? The role of the imagination

in 'shaping' these manifestations could turn out to be central both to it and to them, raising the whole question of the place of the imagination in experience and judgement. And the 'artless', direct, exhibition of sensibility seems to have become inseparable from its own imaginative 'artfulness'.

In this particular case, Emma's tentative defence of her secrecy amounts to the claim that sensibility itself dictates a degree of concealment out of the very 'sympathy' that binds her to the object of her love, even though such concealment is in principle never desirable. Hence we find that the particularity of the sympathetic bond carries with it a degree of tension with the rational universalism of abstract, normative discourse, an element of selectivity and exclusion; and in itself, for Emma, this may be a tension we have to live with. But, conversely, concealment *within* relations of sensibility and intimacy is disastrous: she points out to Augustus that his mysterious silences made matters worse; the absence of mutual sympathetic engagement leaves scope for passionate excess, particularly as passion is 'roused and stimulated by obstacles'.⁴⁵

Here we encounter, again, that eighteenth-century fascination with the idea of a universal language of feeling, of the body-as-sign, the 'community of sentiment' that underlies apparent diversity: signs as manifestations of bodies that are also figurations of the social. 'Because feelings were deemed natural, they united people rather than isolating them; they were shared by all, a public resource', as William Reddy puts it.⁴⁶ Hence the encouragement for these emotional outpourings, each one 'an outpouring which proved one's existence through the sensations which it excited', as Vincent-Buffault argues, in her study of the ultimate manifestation of this – those tears, whether of sadness or joy, or both at once, that drench texts and bodies alike.⁴⁷ As we found with Greuze, however, there are real problems here.

As Emma comes to realize, language itself can be both inadequate and deceptive. For Janet Todd, sentimentality reveals the inadequacy of language: novels supposedly reflect good manners, yet their language is fractured by repetition, hyperbole, rhetorical intensity, and a tidal wave of exclamation marks, italics and capital letters – in short, an overabundance of words and punctuation that strain to convey the immediacy of feeling yet actually undermine it.⁴⁸ Language and feeling fly apart: each is in excess of the other, forced together yet mutually incommensurable. The novel thereby constructs 'a sensitive and socialised body', writes John Mullan, 'the site where the communicative power of feeling is displayed, but also where sensibility can become excessive or uncontrollable'.⁴⁹ Hence the preoccupation with 'signs' as direct expressions of feeling, signs that communicate messages *through* their very expressiveness. Exploring

this, David Denby suggests this reveals ‘the possibility of sentimental transparency: words may betray, but other signs permit others to know the inner life of the subject, and the signs of sensibility figure high among the elements of this universal language’. He shows how tiny textual details can be loaded with a powerful affective charge, a ‘sentimental effect’ that concentrates the circulating meanings in the particular feature, by a kind of synecdoche.⁵⁰ Yet, as already suggested, it is not so easy to be sure of the ‘artlessness’ of the body.

Image, imagination and the narrative of feeling

We have seen that Emma aspires to ‘paint’ the truth, in her account. Images, indeed, play an important part in the novel. At the very start, Emma complains, in writing to her stepson, of having to ‘renew images’ of harrowing memories, just as other memories, recalled through images, can of course carry pleasure. And the initial ‘connection’ with Augustus, after all, was through his image, as captured in his portrait; she saw this before she saw him. This portrait, indeed, seems to have a life of its own. Later, ill and depressed, when she sees it again, the smile seems to have been replaced by ‘an expression of perplexity and sternness’; but later again, in a calmer state, after Mrs Harley’s death, ‘the cold austerity, the gloomy and inflexible reserve’ had gone.⁵¹ Like Dorian’s picture in the eponymous Wilde novel, it seems to become a physical manifestation of an inner state. But *whose* inner state? Here the parallel with Wilde may be inexact. In this miasma of sympathetic connections, it is too easy to see it simply as a projection of Emma’s state of mind. After all, her initial readiness to fall for the portrait is, on her own admission, linked to the ‘sympathy’ existing between Mrs Harley and herself, just as the later assumption of ‘negative’ features could in part reflect Mrs Harley’s state of physical decline, or indeed the state of the relationship between Emma and Augustus. But these sympathetic networks can be too readily psychologized, perhaps: the ‘inner state’ could be as much to do with *relations* as with ‘mind’ or ‘heart’. It may be more a matter of currents and contexts out of which selves are constructed, rather than already-constituted internal contents or attributes of the latter. And what is involved here, in this production of images and portraits out of these currents and connections whereby the emergent self reflexively constitutes itself, seems – appropriately enough – to be a process of *painting*. This is referred to on several occasions. When she asks, ‘How shall I paint the sensations ...’, Emma seems to imply that this can only be partial, that much escapes; whereas, writing later to Mr Francis,

saying she cannot tell her secret, but can try to 'paint' her sensations instead,⁵² the emphasis is more positive: one can, to an extent, paint what cannot be said. Depiction is indirect, but none the less important for that.

Crucially, however, it is the *imagination* that actually has to 'paint the picture'. Images are not in any straightforward way products of feeling; sensibility in this narrow sense is not enough. Its necessary element of passivity, its dependence on perception and sensation, means that without a 'shaping power' it is not able to form (or formulate) feelings, figure them in a way that makes the truth they promise actually knowable as such. That 'shaping power' is the imagination, which by the late decades of the century – years of nascent Romanticism, with Coleridge and Schiller, in particular, exploring the potential of the Kantian imaginary for aesthetics and creativity – has come to represent both the strains or deficiencies of the broadly Lockean empiricist tradition that had dominated Enlightenment thought, and to signal possible ways forward.

For much of the time, the impression given in the novel is one of hostility towards the imagination, emphasizing its dangers. It can be too easily dominated by passion. Such a conjunction typically produces what Emma refers to, intriguingly, as 'a pernicious, though a sublime, enthusiasm', suggesting a hint of admiration for such an excess, however rationally dubious it may be. Indeed, this linking of terms couples the long-established Enlightenment distrust of 'enthusiasm' – a fusion of popular credulousness, superstition and religious fervour – with the Romantic fascination with the sublime, the fusion of the awesome and the dangerous, encapsulating the very evolution of one into the other, while reminding us that its source, in elements of popular consciousness, cannot wholly be assimilated into a specialized realm of art. And here we begin to encounter the potentially positive dynamic of the imagination. Her problems, she suggests, may be due to 'the imagination capable of sketching the dangerous picture'.⁵³ And the 'dangerous picture', as an idealization that reveals the power of the imagination to shape the discrete phenomena of experience, figure them *through* art, is thus necessarily transformative, for good or ill. Mary Hays herself adds, in a letter, that the individual with 'strong mental powers', like the revolutionary, 'transcends temporality and creates new worlds in imagination'.⁵⁴ What can in some contexts be misleading can also be creatively (and politically) potent; and this creativity can lead us to a kind of truth, just as it can result in error. Emma claims, tellingly, that 'without some degree of illusion, and enthusiasm, all that refines, exalts, softens, embellishes, life – genius, virtue, love itself, languishes'.⁵⁵ Thus we learn that semblance itself can embody, or result in, a kind of truth: art *as* semblance is an aspect of the potential of aesthetic truth itself.

In the context of the novel, one would think that the imagination would work primarily through narrative, though, as we have seen, *Memoirs* is particularly appropriate for raising questions about the relation between narrative, reflection, and the manifestation of 'sympathetic connection' in ways that keep issues of imagery and truth constantly in play. In a novel that is written *as a letter*, from Emma, and largely draws on letters for its narrative, we find that the most extensive episode of self-reflection – Chapter VI in Part II – is written *as if* it were a letter, a letter to herself, her self.⁵⁶ By implication, one writes to oneself as one writes to others. This epistle to the self, as the form of self-reflection, becomes simultaneously an exercise in self-constitution, again posing difficult questions of presence and revelation, of truth and self-knowledge. She reflects on her self-deception in pursuit of Augustus; but if she was wrong then, what proof that she is right now? If she can conceal the identity of Augustus from Mr Francis, what can she conceal from herself? There is a sense, it seems, in which reflexive knowledge actually reflects an inability to be fully self-present, or, more positively, a process of figuring self as other that simultaneously eludes and grasps it.

Incorporated in writing, this process enforces narrative interruptions, as the reflexive mode disrupts the narrative while simultaneously, subtly, continuing it by other means. Wishing she had followed her aunt's advice, regretting her excessive enthusiasms, Emma writes: 'But I check this train of overwhelming reflection, that is every moment on the point of breaking the thread of my narration, and obtruding itself to my pen.' 'Narration' here implies a certain *lack* of reflection, the 'getting on with it' aspect of telling a story, and living a life, hence the partial lack of self-understanding inherent in this everyday process. In an early scene, after first meeting Mr Francis, she writes, after he has left, of 'the solemn stillness, so grateful to the reflecting mind, that pervaded the scene ...'⁵⁷ Here, Emma emphasizes the *difference* of the reflexive mode, the way 'reflection' *stops* life, stops time, entailing a kind of 'stillness' in our response to life, our capacity to live it, as though we are in part out of it, beyond it. And, corresponding to the emphasis on sensibility, in its broader sense, and sympathy, this is life itself, as a feeling, or mood, experienced in part as response to nature, to be located as much 'outside' as 'inside', a sense of harmony, as stillness, all around and within. Action and process become stasis, available for appropriation or projection as *image*, as spectacle. The scene asks to be painted, to be preserved as tableau. Yet of course the reflexive mode is problematical here, too: in the novel, it is necessarily recuperated *as* narrative, even while implicitly questioning this.

Mary Hays, too, is writing to her readers, and this is inseparable from her self-reflection; and she does not necessarily expect a reply, though at some level doubtless hopes for one, some 'public' response. This writing, this 'letter', then, is straddling boundaries that are constituted as inherently problematical: not only self and other, but private and public, in that the 'private' – indeed intimate – letter is both addressed to the other and put on public display, exhibited, written and written *about*, an element in the spectacle it helps to constitute. And just as the self, through text and body, is always, in principle, on display, so also this whole process questions or straddles another boundary, that of fiction/reality, since imaginative figuration is inherent in this whole process whereby the self grasps or projects its essential otherness to itself, and which necessarily raises issues around 'fiction' in the broader sense (truth, falsity, deceit).

This can be placed in a wider cultural context. Denby argues that fiction has 'both an especially self-conscious focus on the sphere of feeling and a generic appropriateness in presenting it'. This is because the 'examined life of feeling' is 'like a lived fiction in that its object is always mediated by imagination, conditioned by context, and modified by time'.⁵⁸ And all this has an interesting implication, drawn out by the eighteenth-century aesthetic theorist Henry Home, Lord Kames: 'if, in reading, ideal presence be the means by which our passions are moved, it makes no difference whether the subject be fable or reality'.⁵⁹ The phrase 'ideal presence' was intended, suggests Michael Bell, as a 'careful balance between immediacy of the response and the imaginative status of the object', and as such 'must not collapse into being perceived too simply as either fact or as fiction'.⁶⁰ In short, as Reddy puts it, 'because feelings, whether inspired by fiction or by life, were the same ... the difference between art and life was attenuated'.⁶¹ Nor is emotional response to fiction necessarily any less intense because of this element of the vicarious: Margit Sutrop argues that the imagination, directed towards fictional objects, can provoke such emotion even if we 'know', at some level of awareness, that the object is a work of fiction,⁶² which reinforces the sense that the standard fiction/reality distinction can be tenuous or unhelpful in this context. Coleridge's phrase 'willing suspension of disbelief' seems pertinent here: we may not straightforwardly believe in the reality of the object, but it is not make-believe or pretence, either. Finally, Bell adds – ambitiously and controversially – that 'the sentimentalist assumption of emotional continuity between the living reader and the fictional object lies at the heart rather than the periphery of the response to fiction'.⁶³

In the light of this, we can return to the text – and the body. Tilottama Rajan points out that *Memoirs* is a 'textually self-conscious work' which seeks to

'position experience within textuality and relate textuality to experience'.⁶⁴ And this 'experience' is particularly the experience of the body, coded as 'feeling'. The body, in turn, is not a totally self-contained entity, but part of a network of sympathy, in which such 'sympathy' manifests connectedness, spills beyond the self and, indeed, through 'feeling', becomes partially constitutive of the latter. The body can be seen as facing both ways, subject and object of feeling, self and other uneasily superimposed. It is 'nerves' – simultaneously mental and physical – that show this most effectively: 'nerves' and 'distempers' seem to affect imagination and body alike, and are affected by them, in this generalized circuit of the forms of dis-ease.⁶⁵

But the dis-ease seems to go deeper here. Peter Logan has noticed that Emma seems to experience narration as a violation: retelling her story requires 'involuntary self-violence'.⁶⁶ Indeed, right at the start Emma addresses her stepson by pleading '... why do you tear from my heart the affecting narrative'; yet, she cannot 'keep back the recital, written upon my own mind in characters of blood'.⁶⁷ Logan argues that since, for Hays, women are 'uncertain of reason, denied agency, and unable to trust their own feelings', pain is left as the only sign of narrative authority: not a guarantee of reason, but at least a sign of distance from desire, from passion. It is as though 'the only time a woman can know she has something to say is when her body tells her not to say it';⁶⁸ only thus can narration become a *response* to the nervous body, rather than a symptom or aspect of it. If passion and reason both fail, pain alone remains.

This is insightful – and raises gender issues for us to return to – but there is a risk of falling for the simplistic dichotomy of Enlightenment reason versus passion: it is an implication of what has been argued before that Emma is struggling towards a broader sense of narrative understanding that goes beyond this distrust of the body, and tries to find a place for the imagination as an important aspect of this. At the start, framing her account for her stepson, she advises: 'be not the slave of your passions, neither dream of eradicating them', for they are the basis of our 'talents'. She elaborates the point in her rhetorical question, later on, in a letter to Mr Francis: 'What are passions, but another name for powers?'⁶⁹ Passion, properly harnessed, is a creative force. Hence rationality needs to be 'embodied', via sensibility, and linked to passion, via the imagination, making possible a creative response to the world, whether as action or as art. In this sense, what traps Emma, what gives her pain, is that she can find no clear, objective way of distinguishing between the latter, positive model, and the flawed model, in which that very rationality that sets itself *against* the body can so easily end up as rationalization, prey to the body and its desires, so that,

in Emma's case, in thrall to her passion for Augustus, 'the certainty of her own rationality becomes the primary symptom of its absence', as Logan puts it.⁷⁰ Having lived this failure, now forced to return to it, through recalling, narrating and reinterpreting it, she can have no guarantee that her account can be any more reliable, and it is hardly surprising if this re-membling, which is also a dis-membling, brings pain with it. And if this is Emma's tragedy, it may not be hers alone.

There are several Emmas present here, then; can they ever achieve any final synthesis? Emma in the throes of passion gives way to Emma analysing her passion, getting an understanding of it; she in turn gives way to Emma analysing her analysis, realizing that her supposedly rational understanding was a rationalization, reaching thereby the important insight that those who proclaim their rational grasp of a situation are often those most in thrall to psychological drives and the distortions of self-interest. But can she be sure that her later self-understanding, framing her whole account from her current vantage point as narrating subject, is adequate? We appear to be in a regress, one that is in principle insoluble, raising as it does the whole issue of reflexivity, an issue raised earlier in reading Diderot, but now returning with renewed force. If Emma remains *herself*, if there *is* a subject there, then it cannot simultaneously reflect on itself, without remainder; and if there are several selves, it is difficult to see how the current one can claim any final authority over the others. There are, of course, external limits to this process, the contingencies of life – and death – but these can only be arbitrary.

There is, however, an internal limit – or, more strictly, one that bridges the internal/external dichotomy – and this is given by the very fact of 'framing' itself, a point where narrative again engages with the pictorial and with emergent notions of the autonomy of art. Here, authorial decision becomes its own justification, as it were: the point at which closure seems appropriate to Hays is quite sufficient to justify it. For what we encounter thereby is the work as *work of art*, defined by the frame that sets it off in its own apparent sufficiency, through its own internal principles of organization; and 'truth' becomes coloured by aesthetic criteria – criteria defined by the relation of feeling and imagination – as well as cognitive and ethical ones. And in this particular case, the *Memoirs* carries the profound truth of the discourse of sensibility, the ultimate refusal of any absolute distinction between 'mind' and 'body', with 'feeling' as the crucial linkage, reminding us of the work of art that is life itself. It also suggests that 'narrative' cannot close itself off from image, tableau, and participation in the world of spectacle, hence also implying the ultimate impossibility of the work

of art (and art itself) separating itself off from the rest of life. For Emma herself, closure comes at a point where she 'feels' a degree of understanding – but it is also precipitated by the demand of her stepson for an account of her life. The contingencies always have the last word ...

Reason, sensibility and the critique of gender: Problems of Enlightenment

For Emma, modern civilization is above all a culture of 'semblance', of disguise, deception and deceit. And this intensifies a problem that has become apparent: if such 'semblance' is everywhere, if the 'spell' is all-pervasive, what are its sources, and how can anyone claim to see through it? We have seen that distortion is always potentially present through the very dependence on images as a central component of the language of sympathy. Such images are, after all, inherently at the level of appearance, rather than depth, hence the realm of 'semblance' as an irreducible aspect of the very means by which sympathy makes itself manifest. Sympathy appears to carry the permanent possibility of delusion with it. But we need to dig deeper.

The potential relevance of gender has been alluded to, and sensibility seems to be the key here. Sensibility is presented as both accessing and revealing a kind of truth; hence Emma can, in principle, see through the semblances, penetrate behind appearances. Feeling as revelation (by the subject) is paralleled by feeling as insight (into the other, into the object). But it is hardly surprising if this appears as a kind of arrogance: first as an excess of confidence in one's own integrity, purity of feeling and motive, and secondly as a sweeping claim to insight into the truths of others, indeed into the nature of modern civilization itself. Feeling becomes the key to the truths of feeling, because feeling seems to access the network of sympathy in some direct, unmediated sense, while the truths of reason are more detached, distant, abstract: truth as rule and principle. (And they are not, of course, necessarily the worse for that: it depends on domain of application, and context of use.) But, actually, we have found grounds for thinking that this network of sympathy, transmitted and known through and as feeling, is simultaneously a world of insight *and* deceit, of truth *and* semblance, always in the context of specifics, the presence of persons, memories, and images. If Emma is as much trapped by this as she is perspicacious about it, this is hardly so surprising; here, the eighteenth-century structure of feeling seems to be concentrated with particular intensity, the tensions in the

cultural configurations through which it is articulated becoming particularly apparent.

While not herself claiming to be a philosopher, Mary Hays moved in 'Enlightened' philosophical circles, and was familiar with the ideas of Helvétius and the Lockean tradition. Her novel implies both a critique of gendered aspects of this tradition, and an attempt to point to a way of 'doing philosophy' that would avoid some of the pitfalls, those of over-abstraction in particular. Feeling relaxed after having met Mr Francis, and finding her feelings reflected in objects around her, Emma suggests that 'After having bewildered ourselves amid systems and theories, religion, in such situations, returns to the susceptible mind as a sentiment rather than as a principle'. This is not so much praise of religion as a complaint that abstract systems of thought that lose touch with feeling are missing some essential dimension of human life; and we have already suggested that feeling always has an element of the particular and the specific about it. And her stepson is urged to learn from the particular incidents of her life 'a more striking and affecting lesson than abstract philosophy can ever afford'.⁷¹ The word 'lesson' implies that there needs to be a way of mediating the particular and the abstract or general: looked at in the right way, a particular becomes an exemplar, not merely particular but not subsumable under a rule either; it involves judgement, sensitivity to both poles of the dichotomy, a refusal to let the dichotomy exhaust the possibilities.⁷² But it is an exchange of letters with her philosopher friend Mr Francis – who is almost certainly modelled on the philosopher and political theorist William Godwin – that brings all this into sharpest focus.

Proclaiming that 'independence' is 'the first lesson of enlightened reason', Mr Francis develops the point: 'The system of nature has perhaps made me dependent for the means of existence and happiness upon my fellow men taken collectively; but nothing but my own folly can make me dependent upon individuals.' He adds that this does not, of course, prevent one from 'admiring, esteeming, and loving' individuals who are worthy of such responses. Emma is having none of this: such admiration, esteem and love must imply a degree of dependence on the individual concerned, which in turn must imply an acute sense of lamentation if the object of our affection is lost to us, for whatever reason – which is, of course, precisely her own personal situation *vis-à-vis* Augustus. The difference here is critical, for it is not just about feeling. Mr Francis is arguing from the existence of already constituted selves, the subjects of Enlightenment philosophical speculation, and the citizens of emergent 'civil society', orienting themselves to their own interests in the light of reason;

Emma is arguing from a point at which such selves and subjects are in process of constitution, perhaps in a *never-ending* such process, one that gives a certain priority to the network of sympathies out of which these bounded individuals arise, in their perhaps imaginary independence. And, in a revealing aside, she adds that 'love in the abstract, loving mankind collectively, conveys to me no idea'⁷³ – a 'confession' that could be taken, by a later age, either as revealing her own failings, perhaps reflecting a broader cultural inadequacy, an as-yet inadequate grasp of the possibilities of human emancipation, inseparable from precisely this ability to 'think mankind collectively' and 'in the abstract'; or, conversely, as a prescient *critique* of an Enlightenment project that accurately pinpoints one of its central flaws, its *inability* to think abstraction through concrete particulars, specific contexts and hence its potential for totalitarianism. These points link up: an adequate philosophical position must encompass the particularities of feelings and relationships, *in relation to* broader principles; and this in turn, for the author, opens up a terrain for fiction, a role, for example, in 'delineating the progress, and tracing the consequences, of one strong, indulged passion, or prejudice' since this can 'afford materials, by which the philosopher may calculate the powers of the human mind, and learn the springs which set it in motion'.⁷⁴

To come to Emma's own claim, then, she argues that it is not nature but 'the barbarous and accursed laws of society' that have denied independence to women.⁷⁵ Her critique could be seen to lay itself open to counter-attack, however. She appears to be calling for a revaluation of the relation between reason on the one hand, and the 'non-rational' sphere of sentiment and passion on the other; yet she herself also aspires to the 'independence' that alone makes rational judgement possible, is clearly envious of the freedoms it brings, and can at times seem to present the 'other' realm, in part at least, as compensation for, or unfortunate by-product of, that very *lack* of independence that characterizes the status of women, of which she is so acutely and perceptively aware. Although this tension is not explicitly resolved in the text – and may in some ways be irresolvable – we can at least try to get a clearer view of the terrain on which it arises, and the hints of a way beyond it.

Emma's critique has several dimensions. One can start from the fact that the oppression of women has adverse consequences for *both* sexes. Men are reduced to pursuing their interests, thus becoming the 'wretched, degraded victims of brutal instinct'; women, conversely, remain 'insulated beings', able only to watch, to witness, the drama of life, and if they manage to avoid sinking into 'mere frivolity and insipidity', do so by being 'sublimed' into 'refined, romantic,

factitious, unfortunate' beings. Women are thereby rendered 'feeble and delicate by bodily constraint and fastidious by artificial refinement'⁷⁶ – all of which amounts to a highly prescient and insightful account of the fate of the sexes during the century to come, and beyond. Emma's critique is thus deepened by pointing simultaneously to the egocentric, driven quality of independent male 'rationality' under these social conditions, and to the impotence and artifice of the feminine part of the now strongly gendered realm of sensibility, in which women, only able to witness rather than participate, can only be aware of each other as witnesses to witnessing, manifested in the artificial conventions of surface and display. This, then, grounds a critique of sensibility that also seeks to rescue it, in a stronger sense: that is, sensibility as a form or language of sensitivity, responsiveness to others, connectivity – in short, sensibility as the face of sympathy, testament to its presence.

We can see that 'sympathy' is posited here both as a ground, and as a potential; both a condition for meaningful social intercourse, and a call for it, or promise of it, beyond those social conditions that systematically negate its potential through this reified, impoverished gender polarization. Hence Emma's claim that the 'vain ostentation' of 'lip deep sentiment' can be distinguished from the real thing – alluded to above – can at least be given a clearer rationale. But we can also see what happens to sympathy in this situation. When it is embedded in the egocentric 'rationality' of patriarchy, it in turn is rendered liable to justifiable criticism as a self-centred feeling of superiority and patronizing disdain for the afflicted other even as help is being – or may be – offered. And, in this case, the 'other' may be woman herself, hence Emma's contemptuous claim that 'the men who condescend to flatter our foibles, despised the weak beings they helped to form.'⁷⁷ A corollary that would seem to follow is that feminine sympathy also suffers here, liable either to ineffectuality or to excess, being overwhelmed by passion, hence both rather indiscriminating and socially ineffectual, unconnected with possibilities for meaningful action – thus unwittingly reinforcing the plausibility of 'rational' male critique (as we have seen with Mr Francis).⁷⁸ And the upshot is a model of sympathy and sympathetic giving in which the omnipresent influence of a corrupt social order renders motives of self-interest – including the need to feel good about oneself – ever-present, and difficult to separate from the operations of the very sympathy that purports to escape them.

All this inevitably has consequences for Emma personally. She is as much victim as critic. She protests her virtue – 'I have all along used, and shall continue to use, the unequivocal language of sincerity' – but also has to admit, in self-criticism, to her 'weakness and vanity', to 'the illusions of my self-love', to

the fact that ‘my views were equally false and romantic.’⁷⁹ And this is precisely the consequence that one might have predicted, if her critique of patriarchy were to have any validity: namely, the likely confusion of sensibility and self-love, and the distorting effects that excess passion can have in producing a ‘romantic’ misreading of her situation, and of the feelings of Augustus. It also, again, illustrates the author’s thesis about the appropriateness of the literary form for social and philosophical reflection.

And here, for now, we must leave Emma – but not her concerns, and her passion for change.

Community, sensibility, observation

Can there be a ‘community of feeling’? Can sensibility be the foundation of a social order? Enough has been said already to suggest that the sentimentalist pathos of the present as loss gives a distinctive flavour to all this: community always seems to involve separation, even from the truth of experience itself. Mullan goes so far as to argue that the vocabulary of feeling ultimately ‘elaborates society as a capacity of the self’, and that, in the end, ‘There is no social space for sensibility’,⁸⁰ but this may take the bounded self of the modern ideology of individualism too much at face value. Manning figures ‘tears’ as the negative emblem of change: sensibility embodied ‘loss and melancholy as the inevitable price of progress in the world of civil society’.⁸¹ Ostensibly about connection, it actually embodied rupture. Vincent-Buffault refers to the ‘liquid circulation’ of tears, a kind of economy of sorrow, which appeared to bind people in transient but meaningful social situations. She writes: ‘This participation through tears in the suffering of others ... this more general emotion concerning the ills of humanity indicated a new relationship with others regulated by emotional identification.’⁸² And while one can observe a tension between sentimentalism and the ‘philosophical history’ of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on rationality and progress, the two could also complement each other, as is particularly apparent in the French case, producing a potent brew crucial to the ideology of revolution.⁸³

We can explore the implications of all this by looking in more detail at newly emergent social practices and institutions of the early to mid-eighteenth century in Britain. The old system of parochial relief had left the poor relatively invisible, whereas the new charitable organizations reversed this, seeking to display – and thereby create – a category of ‘deserving poor’, or ‘deserving cases’ of misfortune

more generally. The process of presenting particular 'cases' as instances of 'types' of misfortune to the public, to the gaze of the more fortunate, would of course be expected to produce the charitable contributions that would in turn testify to the sensibility of the latter.⁸⁴ We thereby encounter a process whereby 'the humanity of the excluded'⁸⁵ is reconstructed, with the universal located in the morally relevant particular, in that distinctive mix of visibility, sensibility and theatrical display that constitute the central features of the emergent 'spectacle of sympathy'. In her illuminating account, Jessie Van Sant takes the instance of Magdalen House, in London, an institution for penitent prostitutes; sermons would be preached in front of the women and their benefactors, recounting individual instances of distress, and resulting in plentiful tears all round, a 'theater of pathos'⁸⁶ that simultaneously certified the institution's viability and legitimacy.

We can detect an interesting link here, between curiosity and pity, science and sympathy, in that both focus on particulars, and both place an emphasis on observation; and we can detect an oscillation between pathetic and investigative observations of suffering. And science – by then, a widespread practice and an object of public fascination – requires not just observation but also experiment, the controlled intervention in nature to produce results which would prove hypotheses. Something of this can also be found in Magdalen House: the display of virtuous suffering and its relief would prove the efficacy of intervention; and the display would, in turn, stimulate further intervention, by affecting the emotions of the spectators. Both victims and spectators can thereby prove their status as sensitive beings. Thus sensibility calls for active intervention, proof, and this can slide into manipulation of the other to *produce* suffering: to study suffering, and test one's reaction to it, it may be necessary to stimulate it, and the 'drama of sensibility ... caused by misfortune, evil agents, an author, or a scientist, can invite either objective scrutiny or sympathetic identification', as Van Sant puts it,⁸⁷ and the one approach can flip easily into the other. Science and literature can be oddly reflective of each other's methods and concerns.

James Boswell is known to have visited the hanging grounds of Newgate and Tyburn – a not infrequent occurrence among the socially respectable of the time. He was aware that his behaviour could be regarded as callous, even cruel, but asserts that it was actually 'proof of sensibility':⁸⁸ it was an exercise in self-observation and sympathetic identification, participation in dramatic spectacle and scientific observation, an experiment in feeling. As with Yorick in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), we again find that there can be as much interest in the self's responses as in the suffering that is the ostensible object of sympathy.⁸⁹

The capacity for other-identification, sympathy for the predicament of the sufferer, is constantly threatened by this immediacy, this reflexive lingering on the moment of emotional response that can produce self-absorption; and hence, again, the 'excess' of feeling, obscuring the object, that is such a feature of the culture of sentimentalism.⁹⁰

This combination of detached objectification and sympathetic engagement can also be turned back on the self, then, simultaneously creating or recreating a sense of self as object and as emotional resource: the self becomes reflexively constituted *through* this experience of engagement with the other. In this drama of sympathy, the self too can become other, object of curiosity alternating with subject of emotional experience, as we saw with Emma's story, thus producing a tension that is also central to modern self-management and to the power of 'selfhood' as the basis of our individually centred engagement with the world, whether in terms of reason or emotion, science or aesthetics. In one of his sermons, Hugh Blair claimed that sensibility 'lays open the heart to be pierced with many wounds from the distresses which abound in the world';⁹¹ such 'wounded hearts' – a favourite figure of the time – testifying to this reversibility of pain whereby subject and object could change places, as response and provocation, cause and effect, in this theatrical spectacle of suffering in which narrative and tableau are both deeply implicated.

Novelists do indeed play their full part in this drama of sensibility in which sympathy, curiosity and manipulation feed off one another. The novelist as experimentalist systematically manipulates both characters and readers, developing scenarios in which both can reveal themselves through the engagement of their feelings, particularly sympathy, the inter-subjective feeling *par excellence*. Cruelty becomes a method of revelation, in the spirit of Oliver Goldsmith's advocacy of 'torturing' nature, by experiment, forcing 'her' to give up her secrets.⁹² And in these respects, and as hinted in the previous chapter, the sadomasochistic scenario is really only an extreme version of this pattern, revealing its logic. In *Clarissa* (1747–8), the heroine becomes such through trials and tests, in which the author, Richardson, seems to identify as much with the villain, Lovelace, as with the observer, Belford; Clarissa thereby becomes the 'persecuted maiden' who recurs endlessly in pornography, with Sade's Justine as merely the best-known version.⁹³ Nor is Clarissa's own positioning so straightforward; Laura Hinton argues that 'Clarissa's own subject is bound up in the sadomasochistic contradictions between autonomy and dependency, aggression and desire', documenting her 'unacknowledged masochistic aggression'.⁹⁴ And this dialectic of distancing and involvement renders the reader, too, subtly

complicit in Clarissa's fate, and fascinated by his or her own responses, as the very objectification inherent in the authorial relation to the novel is mapped onto the reader's own relation to self. Through this, ethical and aesthetic categories and responses are disturbed, and Van Sant argues that 'The aesthetic detachment necessary in order for the creation of suffering to be acceptable as a source of pleasure is analogous to scientific detachment'.⁹⁵ And we can also note the paradoxical, parodic nature of the culminating 'experiment', the rape, when the administration of laudanum has rendered Clarissa insensible and unconscious: the essence of the feminine revealed in its very absence ...

This spectacle of sympathy clearly presents problems, then. Some different implications are spelt out in this letter to a magazine, from 1791: 'Let us beware of becoming spectators in scenes of cruelty, lest by repeated and horrid spectacles of this kind, we lose the sympathetic sense which vibrates at the pain of another.'⁹⁶ The influential physician Benjamin Rush agreed with this: purely 'passive' sympathy threatened society by breaking the link between experience and action, observation and involvement.⁹⁷ In effect, these are already pointing to what has, of course, been the very influential argument that sympathy as spectacle has a morally anaesthetizing effect: this argument, far from being a late development, has been in place from the very beginning. And we can point to the emerging paradox that the spectacle of sympathy can produce objections both because of the slide between observation of suffering and the production of it – as discussed above – and because of the breaking of that link in the pure passivity of contemplation. Whether this is a double bind, inherent in the situation and in the discursive possibilities opened up by it, or whether there can be a response that is properly 'responsive', and can be active without being manipulative, is of course a crucial issue to return to; but for now we can take up the more specifically political aspects of this spectacle of involvement and detachment, whereby the community of suffering is constituted.

Sympathy and the politics of pity

The suggestion, then, is that this vicarious community of the spectacle of suffering might be one that actually *needs* suffering, as its own source of energy, that it might have a vested interest in perpetuating it, as much as in ameliorating it, and that 'sympathy' is part of this process of production, rather than an 'innocent' response. This tradition of sympathy critique reached its culmination in the influential work of Hannah Arendt. Given that the focus of her work in

this area is on the French Revolution and its consequences, it seems particularly appropriate to consider it here.⁹⁸

Basic to her argument is an attempt to distinguish between compassion and pity. For Arendt, compassion is an immediate response to the plight of a particular person; it is not primarily a feeling or emotion, indeed may not involve these at all. As act or reaction, it is essentially mute, more a matter of gestures than words. Above all, it cannot be generalized: 'Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.' Jesus, as portrayed in Dostoevsky's 'The Grand Inquisitor', is the classic exemplar: he has compassion for each and every one of us, in our irreducible singularities, manifesting an ability to comprehend all, as individuals, that can only be divine. For Rousseau, on the other hand, '... while the plight of others moved his heart, he became involved in his heart rather than in the sufferings of others, and he was enchanted with its moods and caprices as they disclosed themselves in the secret delight of intimacy'; and this slide, she adds, proved crucial in 'the formation of modern sensibility'.⁹⁹ This is Arendt's version of the argument that one's feelings can all too easily supplant the other as focus of attention, and from this she generates a critique of pity.

When 'compassion becomes talkative', pity is discovered. With pity, generalization becomes possible; pity keeps its 'sentimental distance' and can 'reach out to the multitude'.¹⁰⁰ As Luc Boltanski glosses it, pity 'generalises in order to deal with distance, and in order to generalise becomes eloquent, recognising and discovering itself as emotion and feeling'.¹⁰¹ Here we have an interesting reaffirmation of the idea that 'narrating emotion' can develop it and encourage self-centredness, that 'narrative' and 'emotion' can feed off each other in an endless spiral. Reading – or writing – the novel can indefinitely defer the compassionate action that may ostensibly be called for, even though it may *also* contribute to a general awareness of issues that can be shaped into a political response. But Arendt, true child of the rationalist Enlightenment, distrusts all such passion in the public sphere, and sees only the dangers: 'without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak'. And because, as has been seen, 'pity can be enjoyed for its own sake ... this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others'.¹⁰² Inspired by Enlightenment ideals, the French Revolution, that ultimate sentimental event, proclaimed '*le peuple toujours malheureux*'¹⁰³ as the fount of virtue, and the need to relieve suffering

as its essential drive. Yet this grandiose experiment revealed – more clearly perhaps than Magdalen House – that the display and the relief of the ‘deserving poor’ in turn generated a vast category of the ‘undeserving’, shading from the merely apathetic over to the seditious and the counter-revolutionary, just as the activities of the revolutionaries themselves swelled the ranks of both groups. Hence the slide to Robespierre’s Terror, wherein pity ‘has proved to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself’.¹⁰⁴

So: the central charge is that pity *needs* its victims, endlessly recreates them. Pity always carries with it the implication of separation, distance, even superiority. To pity someone requires, or indeed reinforces, a degree of autonomy. In this sense, pity could unwittingly serve the interests of the self, strengthen it, just as it could serve the interests of the socially powerful. And this could be true even of that characteristic eighteenth-century scenario where the beholder breaks down in tears: appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this can reflect a self-interest that is confident about putting itself at some apparent risk, and could be further strengthened in the process. It is more about testing the self, or validating the self-respect of the group, than any real concern for the other. And if the structural asymmetry is unaffected by the emotional display, it becomes easy to disparage or distrust the latter. The danger, then, is that this brings about an *interest* – a possibility of self-interest – in the existence of pity, and the object of pity. The pitfalls of sentimentalism are manifest: that in responding to your suffering by my own feelings of sadness, thereby showing my sensitivity, I may gain a vested interest in your suffering. I need it, so that I can feel good about myself. And the upshot is the disappearance of your pain in my self-indulgence. And – as we saw with Emma – a further problem is that it is difficult to see how one could ever be really sure that this was *not* the case, that one’s motives were indeed sufficiently pure and unsullied, particularly in a culture in which functionalist stereotypes about selfhood and the drive to self-interest have become so pervasive – assumptions that are, of course, reproduced in this critique itself.

The idea of powerful ‘unconscious’ aspects of mind and self-identity, and their influence on social groups, reinforced or reproduced ideologically, is of course one that only becomes influential *after* the eighteenth century; and what it leaves us with here is the theme of motivational complexity, and the consequent irreducibility of self-understanding to self-conscious awareness. This complexity, though, is arguably just as damaging to the critique as it is to the possibility of pity as a positive force in human relations. It is true that the ‘pity response’ is no guarantee that morally appropriate action will result, or

that such action would be motivationally pure – but this is true of the relation between reaction and response in other contexts, too. And if sentimentalism is flawed here, or can be naïve, this is also true of rationalism: subsuming the instance under the morally appropriate law does not, of itself, guarantee an appropriate outcome either; motivational complexity can just as well interfere here, too. The relation between these two perspectives is significant, though, for our understanding of sympathy, and will be returned to in the next chapter, in the discussion of sympathy theory.

In the meantime, we can observe that it is too easy to dismiss the very possibility of emotional distress at the other's suffering, or to imply that the element of the vicarious present in the spectacle necessarily vitiates the quality, or even the likelihood, of the response. As for self-interest, we have to start from the fact that we do not – generally – feel good about the other's suffering; crucially, what we may feel good about is our capacity to respond sympathetically *to* the other's suffering. In this sense, the other's distress may be a condition for our feeling good about ourselves, but because that distress, in itself, is still distressing, we can in principle still respond to it appropriately. The fact that a slide in focus from the other to the self is possible does not make it inevitable; and if I suspect that I have made that slide, that in turn will counteract the complacency of my self-image – I will not feel so good about feeling good – and push me back towards the claims of the other. If the focus can be kept *there*, the situation is not morally irretrievable, whatever the motivational complexity. This does, of course, imply a (culturally reinforced) capacity for reflexivity, even though this cannot guarantee the outcome – and, as we have seen, this interest in reflexive awareness was certainly present here, both as discourse and pattern of experience. In short, Boltanski's claim that one of the constitutive tensions in a politics of sympathetic engagement is the tension between egoistic self-realization and self-realization through action oriented altruistically – however difficult this distinction may be in practice, and however likely it may be that elements of both will be present – remains more appropriate and useful than the attempt to dismiss the tension present here by reducing the latter alternative to the former.¹⁰⁵

What this altruism might entail, in terms of a sentimental politics, is of course notoriously difficult to pin down. It seems fair to say that it can run from essentially conservative charity, geared to maintaining the status quo, through to radical action to overthrow it: historically, sentimentalism can be found to have been both an apology for hierarchy and its enemy.¹⁰⁶ Yet the ostensible universalism of sentimental themes, the focus on feeling, love, individual aspiration, as somehow more basic, more strong and positive than the restrictions imposed

on them by traditional hierarchical forms, always implies the possibility of life beyond these forms. What Denby claims in the context of French literature surely resonates more widely: 'Sentimental love, the spontaneous expression of the heart, dictated by nature, is pitted against the social prejudice which sets obstacle of birth and fortune in its way, and the sentimental identification of the text is all on the side of the victims.'¹⁰⁷ One might say that the logic of sentimentalism is to push towards the subversion or abolition of contingent historical and social forms of human oppression, so as to highlight a more basic theme in human life: that of the fundamental equality of the human condition in the face of misfortune, those adversities of life and death that can be considered as, in principle, recurrently possible, probable or irremediable. If it is human to suffer misfortune, this recognition should bind us to one another, as the foundation of human community.

And we can return to Arendt here: for there is indeed a relation between sentimentalism and Enlightenment, but one that she misreads. There *is* an opposition, but it is between 'reason' and 'feeling', a polarity shared by the rationalist Enlightenment and the more extreme form of sentimentalism that sets up the mute body as the sole source of the 'language' of truth; as indicated previously, other strands of Enlightenment thinking converge with mainstream sentimentalism in trying to modify or overcome this polarity.¹⁰⁸ And the convergence extends to the Enlightenment project to reduce or remove socially induced suffering, so that only what is left *after* these political projects of reform are carried through could be truly regarded as inherent in the human state. The high points of Enlightenment and sentimentalist influence coincide: sentimentalism and reformism go hand in hand.

Just as the politics of modernity, stemming from the more ambitious versions of the rationalist Enlightenment, was dedicated to the elimination of all suffering, whether natural or social in origin, calling on the full resources of science, technology and the state to achieve this, so a politics of the postmodern might recognize a sense in which the sentimentalist emphasis at least points to limits as well as possibilities of human endeavour. The attempt to control the world to eliminate all suffering produces negative unintended consequences of the process itself. It is not primarily sentimentalism that produces suffering, through some mysterious teleology (it 'needs suffering to feed on'); the world of the project of modernity contributes plenty of its own, thereby in turn producing and reproducing the possibility of sentimentalist politics.¹⁰⁹

But there is an important reservation to be made here. Sentimentalism, embedded in the spectacle of sympathy, is not basically a political or even an

ethical, project. Sentimentalism is not, in itself, primarily about 'doing good', about charitable actions or gifts, in response to the plight of the other. That has always been there, in the Christian tradition. The plight of the other can always trigger sympathy, but what is basic here is the sense of a 'fellowship of selves', of 'fellow-feeling'. And this implies a kind of equality – not, now, an equality of souls before God, but of human selves encountering the misfortunes of life. And not necessarily just humans, either, for this seems to imply a relation to 'nature' as something both 'beyond' and 'within', also involved in this network of 'feeling', again a perspective that sentimentalism shares with influential strands in Enlightenment thought. As Taylor suggests, nature is seen as 'attuned' to our feelings; it can 'reflect and intensify those we already feel or else awaken those which are dormant'. Hence it can 'awaken us to feeling against the too pressing regulative control of an analytic, disengaging, order-imposing reason'.¹¹⁰ We can say that 'nature' serves to encode this sense of a diffuse otherness, the experience of a world *recalcitrant* to control, the sense in which 'experience' *as* experience evades control and subverts the coherence of the self as agent of control. So all this, then, is more a matter of mutuality, of feeling, rather than a moral response, though of course it may perfectly well *result* in the latter. Such 'responsiveness' to the other can readily incorporate doing good; and here the issue of pleasure returns. Diderot claims that 'we need do nothing more in order to be happy than be virtuous'.¹¹¹ Misfortune recognized, acknowledged and, to that extent, *shared*, takes us outside ourselves, affirms our commitment to the other, and, in that respect, is bound to be experienced as pleasurable – which is not, of course, to say that the original experience in itself is, or that we can experience it other than vicariously. The community of loss incorporates pleasure, without that loss thereby being either redeemed or compensated.

But let us give the tableau the last word on this. In the Greuze picture, we see a communal drama of suffering unresolved. We also see action, but action as display, action that apparently negates itself, has no outcome beyond itself. Sentimentalism, one might say, always tends towards the immobilism of tableau, the timelessness of the moment in which we come together in pain, in the separation that locks us together. If we reveal our inner state, our expressive truth, in this moment, and read it in the other, it is simultaneously truth as loss, the truth of loss. But if this is both there, in the picture, and in our relation to it, the loss is also present as absence, our absence *from* the scene inherent in the spectatorial relation. And we know that this distance *can* enable an *active* response – through, rather than despite, emotion – and was frequently intended to do so, in a context in which such depictions were part and parcel

of an Enlightenment vision, one in which sympathy played a significant part. And, finally, this whole relation, between feeling and representation, distance and involvement, can be taken to imply the possibility of a cultural aesthetics of sympathy, a perspective that we will explore further, in the next chapter.

The bonds of sympathy

But let us return to Emma once more, for the last time. In doing this, we repeat something she does twice in the novel, after the deaths of her father and of Mrs Harley. After the latter, she wanders once more through the rooms, 'to view, for *the last time*', the scenes of past 'affections'. The objects and places – the 'scenes' – now have emotional resonance, and seem as if enveloped by a 'mysterious and sacred enchantment'.¹¹² Since they previously lacked this, it is as if they are only invested with it because of this being the 'last time': it is this that gives each of them its uniqueness, as a coalescing of separate memories and experiences into a specificity that is grasped, here, as a manifestation of 'sympathy', that sense of a bond that is only there as, or immanent in, this very experience of it in these terms. And since, in this context, this 'sympathy' necessarily involves memory, the fact that it is not clear from the text whether Emma's 'wandering' over these past scenes was literal or metaphorical hardly seems to matter. Insofar as experience involves any element of reflection or conceptual appropriation, this is the element that is 'lost' in remembering; and since this is essential to the constitution of time, of time-as-experience, the effect is to abolish temporal distance in ('sentimental') presence, while overlaying the latter with the mysterious veil of the past regained. And this veil, this web, of sympathy, clearly extends beyond humans: it incorporates places, objects, even 'circumstances', insofar as these can get involved – as indeed they do – in our 'affections'. It is constantly described in the novel in the language of 'attachment' and 'connection', and involves the idea of a bond, which in turn, in the primary case of relations between people, involves mutuality (*shared feeling*, rather than *feeling for*).

What is clear, in all this, is that the 'mutuality' of sympathy implies a priority of relation, in some sense 'interpersonal' or communal, over entity or self.¹¹³ And as for 'feeling', it is, once again, notoriously difficult to pin down, manifesting what Bell calls 'categorical elusiveness'.¹¹⁴ It subverts or overflows any strict notion of subject boundaries, of an isolated self. And here, a further clue is given by Emma's suggestion, in a conversation with Augustus, that the affections are 'generated' by sympathy;¹¹⁵ for this would imply that part of the

problem with locating 'feeling' is that it is embedded in relations, connections, but emanates from these, and is not reducible to them. To put it the other way round, sympathy is not primarily feeling, or *a* feeling – though we can often think of it in this way – it is, rather, the condition, or virtual state, that is realized *in* feeling. Sympathy is affect in its virtual state, somehow prior to its manifestation in any particular feeling, but only accessible *as* or *through* the latter, with all the problems of image and interpretation that must imply. And that, perhaps, is as far as Emma can take us ...