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Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era

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1

Sentimental Encounter

In 1814, Gilbert Burns wrote of his brother's poems that "every attentive reader of Burns's Works, must have observed, that he frequently presents a caricature of his feelings, and even of his failings—a kind of mock-heroic account of himself and his opinions."[1] Coming from the poet's almost pathologically cautious younger brother, this is a surprisingly bold insight, one that helps to establish the link between Burns's early writings and the sentimental movement.

In 1759, the year Robert Burns was born, Laurence Sterne published the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy,* which might well be described in Gilbert Burns's phrase as Tristram's "mock-heroic account of himself and his opinions." Nine years later, Sterne further explored the "feelings and failings" of one character in *Tristram Shandy* when he made him protagonist of *A Sentimental Journey,* the novel that entrenched a recent coinage: the adjective "sentimental."

One way of beginning to understand eighteenth-century sentimentalism is to remember that its first explicit spokesman, Parson Yorick, owed his name to the most famous stage prop in history—the jester's skull in *Hamlet.* To Yorick, and to his descendants from Harley the Man of Feeling to young Werther, the world was a stage, a backdrop for a series of histrionic gestures aimed at an audience of readers. The sentimental hero viewed everything as Hamlet viewed Yorick's skull: as an object that suggested a subject. The plots of sentimental novels seem disjointed by conventional standards (*The Man of Feeling,* a "fragment," "begins" at chapter 11) because their chief interest is not in the actions of the hero, but in the soliloquies he delivers to the stage props in his vicinity.

A Sentimental Journey moves from pathos to bathos according to whether the prop seized upon is suggestive (the caged starling) or incongruous (the Dead Ass). In the absence of a mad Maria, Yorick makes do with whatever comes to hand:

> . . . was I in a desart, I would find out wherewith in it to call forth my affections—If I could not do better, I would fasten them upon some sweet myrtle, or seek some melancholy cypress to connect myself to—I would court their shade, and greet them kindly for their protection—I would cut my name upon them, and swear they were the loveliest trees throughout the desert: if their leaves wither'd, I would teach myself to mourn, and when they rejoiced, I would rejoice along with them.[2]

Sterne shows in this passage that he is aware of Yorick's parasitic nature. The sentimental process, as Yorick defines it, is to look around, select an object, "fasten" the attention on it, and finally identify it as somehow the property of the sentimental spokesman ("I would cut my name upon them"). Yorick's need to cut his name on his environment compels him to work up responses even to the prosaic things in his field of vision. When he cannot "do better," he focuses on the carriage he is traveling in. And he is so worn out by the intensity of his one-sided relationships with insensate things like his *Desobligeant* that he cannot respond with ordinary kindness when characters like the mendicant monk solicit his benevolence. Throughout the challenges of his journey—the supplicants and victims who beseige him—Yorick prefers dramatic interpretation to real assistance. He is not able even to break the bars of the starling's cage.

Samuel Johnson, on the whole hostile to the sentimental, called the basis of all stability "subordination," that civilizing process by which people discipline their actions, and as far as possible their wishes, to conform to the rules of society.[3] But society does not rule the sentimental hero. Yorick and Harley are so distracted by their fixation on eccentric objects that they never acquire the tact necessary to sustain more conventional relationships. (Harley's social innocence is demonstrated by his inability to transact business, advance his interests with his family, or propose to his Miss Walton.) But although the sentimental hero is outside society, subordination is still necessary to his stability; it just becomes subordination of all the objects in his world to his dominating sensibility. And the objects he admits into his world are the rejected—lunatics, beggars, convicts—of the society he rejects. Men of the world follow a survival principle; men of feeling look after the lost causes.

The benevolist chooses abandoned or humiliated objects to chastise a callous society and also to proclaim his personal transcendence of society's materialism. Yorick's social alienation is burlesqued: when he uses the Dead Ass to admonish the polity ("'Shame on the world!' said I to myself" [p. 141]), the distance between his prosaic vehicle and the impassioned tenor of his message is too great to be bridged without irony. Mackenzie is seldom ironic, but Harley achieves authentic social criticism in some of his encounters. The sentimental viewpoint is exploited in different ways among sentimental novelists—sentimentalism could take on satiric and philosophic as well as humanitarian guises. But one trait that remains constant in sentimental character is the hero's egotism in pursuing the humble; for the lower the object he encounters and reclaims, the more status he achieves in perceiving its significance. His acuteness notices these humble or pathetic things, his good-heartedness accepts them, and his virtuosity triumphs in communicating their significance to readers. (Novelists who acknowledge the compulsive element in sentimental heroism—Sterne and Goethe, for instance—seem better to post-Freudian readers than authors like Mackenzie, whose "psychology" of sensibility goes no deeper than contemporary cant.)

Writers before Sterne and Mackenzie had sympathized with social outcasts, of course: Richardson's *Clarissa* and Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" have been called sentimental because of their vindication of heroine-victims. But these earlier writers displayed their heroines as the subjects rather than the objects of compassion; Richardson and Pope subordinated their own presence so that a central icon of feminine distress could dominate. Sentimental novels following Sterne, however, made the presence of an interpreting sensibility seem more important than the wretchedness described. Yorick's emotions during his scene with Maria seem more powerful than her own. The cult of feeling from Yorick on is characterized by a preference in the sentimental spokesman for props that cannot upstage him. In perceiving the claims of humble things, the benevolist simultaneously demonstrates his benevolence and his supremacy.

The customary perspective of the sentimental hero, then, is a downward view of pathetic objects. This process of condescension is essential to sentimental rhetoric, and the conclusions of sentimental novels often extend to readers the pleasure of adopting that perspective when the hero himself becomes a pathetic object, or corpse. *The*

Man of Feeling offers its most charged view of Harley in the scene where his friends (and the readers they stand for) gaze down at his inanimate "form." Neuter references stress Harley's new status as meaningful artifact:

> I entered the room where his body lay; I approached *it* with reverence. . . . I saw that *form*, which, but a little before, was animated with a soul which did honour to humanity, stretched without sense or feeling before me. . . . I turned, with the last farewel upon my lips, when I observed old Edwards standing behind me. I looked him full in the face; but *his eye was fixed on another object:* he pressed between me and the bed, and *stood gazing* on the breathless remains of his benefactor.[4]

All the ingredients of sentimental scrutiny combine in this passage: the "objectification" of a subject, the pensive downward glance of the sentimental interpreter, and the reverence for the relics of existence that exempts the hero from any commitment to the process of existence. As *The Man of Feeling* concludes, Harley's friend again looks down, this time at Harley's grave, and defends his preoccupation with this shrine: "I sometimes visit his grave; I sit in the hollow of the tree. It is worth a thousand homilies! every nobler feeling rises within me! every beat of my heart awakens a virtue!—but it will make you hate the world—No: there is such an air of gentleness around, that I can hate nothing; but, as to the world—I pity the men of it" (pp. 132–33).

"Pity," not unmixed with contempt, for "men of the world" was a literary pose adopted by Burns as a young man in consequence of his sentimental reading. In his early twenties, Burns wrote to his former schoolmaster John Murdoch:

> My favorite authors are of the sentim[l] kind, such as Shenstone, particularly his Elegies, Thomson, Man of feeling, a book I prize next to the Bible, Man of the World, Sterne, especially his Sentimental journey, Macpherson's Ossian, &c. these are the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct, and 'tis incongruous, 'tis absurd to suppose that the man whose mind glows with sentiments lighted up at their sacred flame—the man whose heart distends with benevolence to all the human race . . . —can he descend to mind the paultry conccerns [sic] about which the terrae-filial race fret, and fume, and vex themselves?[5]

Passages like this, which not only praise sentimental writers but adopt their heroic hostility to social bustle, occur in many of Burns's letters

to early patrons and preceptors. And during the years Burns was wearing out successive copies of *The Man of Feeling* by carrying it next to his heart, he was writing poems that drew on sentimental techniques—notably such early poems of direct address as "To a Mouse," "To a Louse," and "To a Mountain Daisy."

These poems use a selectively vernacular diction and the "standard Habbie" verse form Ramsay had popularized early in the eighteenth century. But his adherence to a "Scottish" verse form should not prevent us from noticing that Burns's poems of direct address use the sentimental structure of benevolent condescension observed above in Mackenzie and Sterne. Here is the same process by which a sensitive interpreter stoops to ponder some humble object—mouse, louse, daisy—that has captured his eye by chance; and here is the same use of that object to set the speaker apart from the mainstream of normal sociability. Burns's peasant persona is just like Yorick or Harley in that everything he encounters is grist to his sentimental mill. Even in the desert of peasant poverty, he finds things to "fasten" on and claim as subjects of discourse, objects of compassion.

When Matthew Arnold wondered at the paradoxical amiability of poems that seldom stray from scrutiny of a "harsh" "Scotch" world,[6] he was responding to Burns's sentimental procedure of selecting especially low things to surround with a saving aura of emotional significance. The effectiveness of Burns's poems of direct address seems to illustrate the radical statement of David Hume in his influential essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757): "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them."[7] When Burns addresses himself to the louse, he is not—as some of his vernacular predecessors were—celebrating "lowness" as "lowness," but upholding the notion of such sentimental heroes as Yorick and Harley that a keen sensibility can perceive meaning in any object. Burns's persona is unconventional only in giving the encountered object a measure of independence from his contemplating mind: it receives a realistic description along with a sentimental amplification.

In "To a Mouse," for instance, the opening stanza describes the mouse as it emphasizes its vulnerability:

> Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous *beastie*,
> O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
> Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
> Wi' bickering brattle!

I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murd'ring *pattle!*
(1:127)

In the second stanza Burns begins to draw the mouse into a human context when he attributes its fear of him to conscious censure rather than to instinct:

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' *fellow-mortal!*

The meter emphasizes the farmer's sentimental wonder that a mouse should "startle" "At *me*, thy *poor*, earth-born companion, / An' *fellow-mortal.*" Burns avoids the voyeuristic overtones of sentimental scrutiny by seeing the mouse as a peer—a victim, perhaps, but a fellow victim. Mice and men have mortality in common, and Burns's speaker suggests that both are equally prey to anxiety:

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' wast,
An' weary *Winter* comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel *coulter* past
Out thro' thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the Winter's *sleety dribble,*
An' *cranreuch* cauld!

Burns's description of the way a field mouse prepares for winter is realistic enough to convince the reader that the emotions he projects simultaneously into her (that nest-building seemed "weary," for instance) are just as "real."

When the owner of the Dead Ass in *A Sentimental Journey* laments that the Ass has succumbed not to overwork but to depression over the misfortunes of its owner, that "the weight of myself and my afflictions together, have been too much for him" (p. 140), Sterne's character seems more deranged than benevolent. Burns establishes his mouse as a normal mouse before turning it to sentimental purposes. The narrator describes mice plausibly for six stanzas before generalizing about what their fate might stand for:

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving *foresight* may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' *Mice* an' *Men*,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

This is so conclusive that it is always surprising to see a stanza following it. The conclusion of "To a Mouse" reverts to mainstream sentimentality. The benevolent speaker, in the tradition of Yorick, Maria, and the handkerchief, ultimately uses the meditation to call attention to himself:

Still, thou are blest, compar'd wi' *me!*
The *present* only toucheth thee:
But Och! I *backward* cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
And *forward*, tho' I canna *see*,
I *guess* an' *fear!*

Burns's conclusion contradicts the spirit of the poem. If the "present only" touches the field mouse, how can she have been said to have "schemes"? When Burns shifts in line 43 to an explicitly italicized "me," he shifts from compassion to self-pity. The poem begins by emphasizing the common liability of mice and men to blows of fate that wreck their plans. When Burns switches from this view of the mouse to the declaration that she is "blest, compar'd wi' *me*," he has undercut earlier images of her "weary" construction of a nest, her distress at its destruction, and her bleak prospect of a homeless winter. He has violated his illusion and made it too clear that the subject of meditation has been only a mouse's nest, not an ideal of security. Burns worked best from sentimental models when he resisted the temptation to compete with the contemplated object.

When Burns's farmer spares the field mouse, he is acting as if there is only one field mouse in the world—his field mouse. He takes up its cause as if its vermin status is irrelevant to his transcendent response to its suffering. Mouse self-interest and farmer self-interest do not run along similar lines: mice eat what farmers raise. Thus there is no real basis for Burns's sympathy for the mouse, only the subjective basis provided by his perception of their common vulnerability to fate. In extending sympathy to his mouse, Burns's speaker reveals that he has left the folk tradition of common sense and entered the sentimental tradition of rare sensibility. In an interesting passage from his "Answer to the 'Guidwife of Wauchope House,'" who had written Burns a vernacular epistle praising his patriotic use of Scottish subjects, Burns imagines himself as a young ploughman who cannot prune a Scotch thistle growing in his barley:

The rough bur-thistle spreading wide
Amang the bearded bear,
I turn'd my weeding heuk aside,
An' spar'd the symbol dear.
(1:326)

This preference for symbolic thistles over edible barley is clearly sentimental.

Samuel Johnson once declared that sheep-shearing could "not be made poetical,"[8] but Burns as virtuoso of sensibility could do the trick with a louse. "To a Louse: On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church" is a more consistent poem than "To a Mouse." It mixes description of the progress of the strutting "ferlie" up "Jenny's" new bonnet with wry warnings against vanity that would probably seem sententious outside this eccentric context:

O *Jenny* dinna toss your head,
An' set your beauties a' abread!
Ye little ken what cursed speed
The blastie's makin!
Thea *winks* and *finger-ends*, I dread,
Are notice takin!

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!

It wad frae monie a blunder free us
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
And ev'n Devotion!
(1:194)

Burns uses an odd context—and the oddity of his selectively vernacular vocabulary—to bring a truism to life: seeing "*oursels as others see us*" would quickly eliminate delusions of grandeur.

Coleridge wrote of Burns: "Genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission."[9] This is the effect of "To a Louse." People do not have to read the Bible to know in their bones that pride goeth before a fall, but "To a Louse" restates this admonition in such unusual terms that Burns's moral takes on the story's concreteness along with its "novelty." Still, it is the competitive benevolence of the cult of feeling that underlies this poem's pious parable. Otherwise, Burns's speaker might well be subjecting himself to the sermon of the minister (the poem takes place during a church service) rather than using the louse to construct a rival sermon on vanity.

Of the poems of direct address in Burns's earliest collection, the Kilmarnock edition of 1786, only "To a Mountain Daisy" fails to charm. Burns's eagerness to take on the wretchedness of a crushed flower seems ultimately more strange than novel, and the description Burns needs to authenticate his message is too often interrupted by digression. When the sentimental amplification comes in stanza 6, it rings false. Burns tries to make the daisy a symbol for too many things and the poem becomes hysterical.

The opening stanza mixes description of the daisy with the establishment of its relationship to the narrator:

Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow'r,
Thou's met me in an evil hour;
For I maun crush amang the stoure
Thy slender stem:
To spare thee now is past my pow'r,
Thou bonie gem.
(1:228)

Stanzas 2 through 4, though abandoning description of the daisy to attack "flaunting" garden flowers, do offer an image that seems to be the bridge between Gray's flower born "to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" ("Elegy," lines 55–56) and Wordsworth's "violet by a mossy stone" ("She Dwelt Among Untrodden Ways"):

> But thou, beneath the random bield
> O' clod or stane,
> Adorns the histie *stibble-field*,
> Unseen, alane.

It is in stanza 5 that the poem becomes shrill:

> There, in thy scanty mantle clad,
> Thy snawie bosom sun-ward spread,
> Thou lifts thy unassuming head
> In humble guise;
> But now the *share* uptears thy bed,
> And low thou lies!
>
> Such is the fate of artless Maid. . . .
> Such is the fate of simple Bard. . . .
> Such fate to *suffering Worth* is giv'n. . . .
> (1:229)

Burns tries to turn the uprooting of a weed into a combination of "The Vanity of Human Wishes" and the Sermon on the Mount, but the moralizing does not sound authentic. More detailed description (like the shaking of the frightened mouse or the "*gawze* and *lace*" over which the louse progresses) might have made the daisy and the incident that prompted the poem seem real enough in themselves to bear Burns's eventual insistence on their symbolic significance, but the descriptive details provided only work against each other. The flower's "unassuming head," for one thing, sounds incongruous after description of its flamboyant "sun-ward spread" bosom. Whenever Burns slights description, he appears—uncomically—to adopt Yorick's godlike assumption that emotional responses can be created by simple fiat.

Poems like "To a Mouse" and "To a Louse," although constructed around a conventional sentimental pose, could only have been written by Robert Burns; but the concluding stanzas of "To a Mountain Daisy" might have been done by almost any eighteenth-century poet in an emotional mood. Gray's "Elegy" influenced "To a Mountain Daisy," and an unusually fervent poem by Pope that Burns admired was one of the sources for his final stanza:

> Ev'n thou who mourn'st the *Daisy*'s fate,
> *That fate is thine*—no distant date;
> Stern Ruin's *plough-share* drives, elate,
> Full on thy bloom,
> Till crush'd beneath the *furrow*'s weight,
> Shall be thy doom!

Burns's conclusion resembles lines near the end of Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady":

> Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung;
> Deaf the prais'd ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.
> Ev'n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,
> Shall shortly want the gen'rous tear he pays.[10]

Between 1717 and 1786 the threshold of responsiveness in poets had lowered so much that Pope's vehement reaction to the suicide of a young woman could be adapted by Burns in a poem about a severed stem.

A passage in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* suggests one distant source for Burns's piling of significance onto the daisy—for the way the flower's fate becomes his own: "Whatever is void of mind, is void and darkness to the mind's eye. This languishes and grows dim whenever detained on foreign subjects, but thrives and attains its natural vigour when employed in contemplation of what is like itself."[11] This intriguing passage provides one context for the egotism that underlies all the alert benevolence of "feeling." Even Uncle Toby, prime example of gentleness that thinks twice about swatting a fly, whistles "Lillabullero" whenever the conversation strays too far from fortifications: his interest "grows dim" when "detained on foreign subjects." Likewise, in "To a Mountain Daisy" Burns has been so intent on finding what he likes (and what is like him) in the image of the flower that he has failed to acknowledge through description that it is something meaningful in its own right.

Trenchant Sterne called such impositions of individual-penchant-as-universal-regulator a "hobby horse." In "To a Mountain Daisy," Burns has revealed that his search for pathetic images is a hobby horse—that his is not a disinterested compassion. His expressions of pity for a wild flower thus seem more self-serving than moving. In "To a Mouse" and "To a Louse," he is more successful, for he describes his objects more and insists on their significance less. (There is also a difference in tone among the poems. "To a Louse" and "To a Mouse" affect a genial Uncle Toby style of benevolence, while "To a Mountain Daisy" is more reminiscent of Mackenzie's Harley at his most lachrymose.)

David Sillar, a friend of Burns's during the 1780s, preserved this incident from Burns's sentimental phase: "It was . . . his custom to read at table. In one of my visits to Lochlie, in time of a sowen supper, he was so intent on reading, I think 'Tristram Shandy,' that his spoon falling out of his hand, made him exclaim, in a tone scarcely imitable, 'Alas, poor Yorick!' "[12] Sillar's story suggests not only Burns's absorption at this time in postures of feeling, but also the poverty of the environment in which he enacted those sentimental fantasies. The life of a Scottish tenant farmer, which Burns once summed up as combining all the "chearless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave" (*Letters*, 1:108), is transformed in Burns's poems of direct address. In poems like "To a Mouse" and "To a Louse," techniques evolved by ironist Sterne and benevolist Mackenzie for milking significance from a stage-prop world are used to circumscribe Burns's bare peasant world with an aura of warmth and idealism. The cult of feeling, which turned ruins into the notion of the picturesque, trained Burns to find a creative vitality in his poverty.

2

"*Love and Liberty*"

In his prologue to Addison's *Cato* (written in 1713, two years after the publication of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*), Pope said that the identification of viewers with the suffering hero was the object of tragedy:

> To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
> To raise the genius, and to mend the heart;
> To make mankind, in conscious virtue bold,
> Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold.[1]

Like the sentimental scrutiny of inanimate objects, this earlier view of emotional projection into a tragic hero imposes a voyeuristic role on the reader or audience. The actions of the drama are not merely to be observed, but to be experienced with an eager sympathy verging on competitive envy of the hero on view. Pope says of our relationship to Cato: "Who sees him act, but envies every deed? / Who hears him groan, and does not wish to bleed?" (p. 96). This is sentiment worthy of Parson Yorick. But not all eighteenth-century readers responded to Cato this way. Johnson (in any case a foe of empathic interpretations of drama) analyzed the audience's relationship to Cato in terms far different from Pope's: "Cato is a being above our solicitude; a man of whom the gods take care, and whom we leave to their care with heedless confidence."[2]

In his enthusiasm for Cato as both hero and victim, Pope anticipated a major preoccupation of the sentimental movement: its cult of pain and failure. In Pope's time, however, the suffering of the hero Cato was still subordinated in emphasis to the excellence of the political principles for which he suffered. Later in the eighteenth century, suffering came to be the index rather than the probable by-product of