Published in: P. Vincent (ed.), *The Cambridge History of European Romantic Literature* (CUP, 2023).

3.

Cultures of Sensibility

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> Generally, the eye and the imagination are more readily drawn by nebulous distance than by what is perfectly plain for all to see.[1]
>
> Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)

This observation by the German painter Caspar David Friedrich, whose *Monk by the Sea* (1809) and *Wanderer about the Sea of Fog* (1817-18) have become emblems of European Romanticism, imparts a law of attraction befitting of the lure and effort to define Romanticism. Some decades before Friedrich, in his preface to *Shakespeare traduit de l'anglois* [Shakespeare translated from English] (1776-82), French critic Pierre Le Tourneur coined the word *romantique* to convey the mood of an overcast landscape, associating Romanticism with a suggestive presence rather than a landscape 'perfectly plain for all to see'. This is also true of the cultures of sensibility that became so central to European Romanticism. Not unlike Friedrich Schlegel, who needed 125 pages to outline the meaning of

[1] Bernhard, Maaz (ed.), *Alte Nationalgalerie Berlin: Museum Guide* (Munich, London and New York, Prestel, 1997), p. 21.

'romantic', readers debated what the words sensibility and sentimental meant. The difficulty of definition was a recurring problem that seemed to eschew any solution. Recognizing this, the British poet and playwright Hannah More, writes: 'Sweet Sensibility, Thy subtle essence still eludes the chains / Of definitions, and defeats her pains'. Opposed in most things political, her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft nevertheless agrees that sensibility 'can only be felt; it escapes discussion'.[2] Wollstonecraft's observation is also echoed by German novelist Dorothea von Schlegel, who, during her conversations with her husband Friedrich, considered the ineffability of feeling and sensation as that which could best mediate the perfect communication (*vollendete Mitteilung*) necessary for a universal, romantic poesy.[3]

A good reason to study European cultures of sensibility is the fact that Romanticism has made itself known for a distinct self-awareness. Without claiming to be romantic (*romantique* was popularized by Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* in 1782) let alone Romantic, the British poet William Wordsworth thought that poets differed from other humans in that they possessed a sensibility acutely conscious of natural and human phenomena, including the phenomena of one's own body. This was because, as fellow poet John Keats declared, the composition of poetry was the curious labour and pleasure of the body: 'I will assay to reach as high as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon

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[2] Hannah More, *Sacred Dramas: chiefly intended for Young Persons: the Subjects taken from the Bible. To which is added, Sensibility, a Poem*, 2nd ed. (London, T. Cadell, 1782), p. 282; Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary a Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, ed. Michelle Faubert (Peterborough, Broadview, 2012), p. 135.

[3] May Mergenthaler, 'Die Frühromantik zwischen den Geschlechtern: Friedrich Schlegel und Dorothea Veit im Gespräch über Friedrich Richters Romane', *The German Quarterly* 81.3 (2008): 302-321, 316.

me will suffer'.[4] For Johann Gottfried Herder, discussed at length in chapter one and elsewhere in this volume, the sensibility we now call Romantic lay 'in the power that cleaves to words, a magic power that works upon my soul through fantasy and recollection'.[5] Often in texts of the period, sensibility emerges as the indefinite and inconclusive feeling that the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi attributes to the aesthetics of the sublime, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that elevates whomever encounters or conveys it.[6] Its suggestiveness arouses something akin to the 'unfathered vapor that enwraps', as Wordsworth would call imagination, too sublime to resign itself to fixity.[7] Imagination and sensibility, as it will be shown here, are close associates.

Suggestiveness does not imply absence of definitions. On the contrary, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Republic of Letters dealt with the concept thoroughly. References to sensibility abound in very diverse contexts, indicating the term's import. I use the word import to signal not only importance but also mobility, what we now call interdisciplinary transfer across fields of knowledge. This essay delineates some of these transfers, starting with the appearance of sensibility in the medical discourse from where it penetrated other discourses. Considered to be a neurophysiological property of sentient

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[4] John Keats, *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of John Keats*, ed. Richard Monckton Milnes (London, Edward Moxon 1848), I, p. 223.

[5] Qtd. In Irvin Babbitt, *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of Arts* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 117.

[6] Margaret Brose, 'Leopardi's l'Infinito and Romantic Sublime', *Poetics Today* 4.1 (1983), 47-71, 53.

[7] William Wordsworth, 'The Prelude', in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York, Norton, 2012), p. 253.

beings, sensibility led to an empirically informed view of the human body and cognition. The body was viewed as communicating in a supralinguistic language that housed wonder and ambiguity. The wonderous communication with everything that surrounded the body was an impetus for philosophy to recruit sensibility as enabler of social bonding. Sensibility as sociable crucible had a strong appeal for inclusive socio-political movements triggered by the revolutions of the long eighteenth century.

Christopher Nagle rightly notes that 'what is most distinctive about the literature we call Romantic might be the uses to which it puts Sensibility'.[8] The creative range of applications was made possible by the concept's transdisciplinary mobility and was in step with the credo of a universal, romantic poesy that refuted the compartmentalization of knowledge. In fragment 116 of the *Athenäum* (1798), Friedrich Schlegel explains that romantic poesy acquires universal breadth through a method which posits interconnections between all areas of human experience. Heeding Friedrich Schiller's call during the Reign of Terror in France for an aesthetic education that aimed to form freedom-loving and freedom-sustaining citizens in 'Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen' ['Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man'] (1795), this was Schlegel's all-encompassing response to the bitter failures of the French Revolution. These were not modest stakes, and their attainability hinged on citizens' capacity to exercise true sensibility towards the rights and duties they owed to themselves, to their kin, to strangers, and what ecocritics calls all 'earth others'.[9] The

[8] Christopher Nagle, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3.

[9] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 182.

lines of thought sketched here are elements of, and reasons for the remarkable 'survival power' of the literature of sensibility in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.[10]

The sensible body: from nerves to ideas

Research concerning the nervous system in the heyday of sensibility points to a synchronic and diachronic cosmopolitan network tended by natural philosophers who followed, disputed, or complemented each other's work across national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic barriers. Recent scholarship alerts us to the participation of sensibility in what Jessica Siskin calls the 'sentimental empiricism' of the Enlightenment as a method and idiom of natural sciences including mathematics, physics, chemistry, a fact that contradicts a dualistic approach to scientific sensibility and rationality.[11] Some of the vocabulary that circulated within the scientific community regarding physiological sensibility, that is, the inherent mechanisms that make the body receptive to external inputs, spilled over into other discourses. Building on the legacy of European and Arabic scholars, eighteenth-century natural philosophers sought to clarify the physiology underlying bodily motion, sensations, and reflexes. Nerves – the receptors and transmitters of sensation – became the focus of their study. The morphology of nerves together with the transmission mechanisms of sensation excited interest because of the insights they might reveal regarding how body, mind and soul interact to make humans a

[10] Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 35.

[11] Jessica Siskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 15; Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

thinking and feeling species. Metaphysics was crucial to this line of enquiry which sought to find the organ responsible for the soul. Its influence is felt in literary works of the nineteenth century literature where the senses and the soul are treated almost synonymously.[12]

René Descartes, who studied nerve morphology, proposed that nerves contained tubules. A fibril ran in each tubule that signaled sensation and released the 'animal spirits' [*les esprits animaux*] that carried the signal to the pineal gland in the brain. Descartes thought the pineal gland was the seat from where the soul controlled our animal spirits. Both the Danish scientist and theologian Nicolas Steno and the British doctor Thomas Willis convincingly refuted the idea that the pineal gland was the soul organ, with Willis maintaining that the soul had no seat and resided in no single organ but spread throughout the body. Willis developed the idea that, unlike brutes, humans also had a rational soul located in the brain, where perception and imagination interact. One of the key challenges was to determine the nature of the agent that transmits sensations. Willis dispensed with the label 'animal spirits', referring instead to 'little bodies' in charge of transmitting nerve impulses. The British physician William Croone argued for the presence of an active and volatile liquid, using the metaphor of vibrations caused by touch on the tightened string of a musical instrument. Another proponent of this metaphor, Isaac Newton, asserted that nerve action was due to the vibrations of ether in the nerves, a substance he thought was present throughout space.[13] The Dutch chemist and botanist Herman Boerhaave, in his seminal *Institutiones*

[12] Consider Mary Shelley's Promethean scientist, who loses 'all soul or sensation' on his gruelling quest to create a death-defying creature. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. D.L. Macdonald and K. Scherf (Peterborough, Brodview Press, 2001), p. 82.

[13] See Sidney Ochs, *A History of Nerve Functions: From Animal Spirits to Molecular Mechanisms* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 81-9.

medicae (1708-75), described nerves as vessels through which passed very small particles that mediated sensation and muscular movement. A member of the French Académie Royale des sciences and of the Royal Society in London, Boerhaave established the medical school in Leyden, which served as a model for that in Edinburgh. For Robert Whytt, a student of Boerhaave's and Professor of the Theory of Medicine the Edinburgh, sensations and motions were determined by what he called the 'sentient principle', an animating and immaterial power distributed in the whole body, however, predominantly present in the nerves, the brain and the spinal marrow.[14] Professors like Whytt and physicians connected with Edinburgh's medical school introduced moral sense philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith to the neurophysiological research on the sensible body. The importance for moral philosophy of these interdisciplinary exchanges can hardly be overstated.

Boerhaave's student, the Swiss physiologist and naturalist Albrecht von Haller, propelled the field of neurophysiology into a new phase with the publication of the first modern textbook of physiology, *Primae Linea Physiologiae* (1747), expanded into the eight-volume *Elementa physiologiae corporis humani* (1757–1766), one whole volume of which deals with the nervous system. Haller hesitates to pronounce anything definite about the soul, which for many had been the holy grail in the study of the sensible body. A pious Protestant, he avoided any metaphysical speculation staying close to the insights gained during his many dissections of animals. These observations convinced him that a high presence of nerves creates higher *sensibilitas*, whereas body parts with fewer nerves and more hard matter such

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[14] Nima Bassiri, 'The Brain and the Unconscious Soul in Eighteenth-Century Nervous Physiology: Robert Whytt's "Sensorium Commune"', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74.3 (2013): 425-448, 428. Whytt likened the sentient principle with gravity, both being immaterial forces working on the body (431).

as tendons and ligaments are less sensitive. Haller drew an influential distinction between *sensibilitas*, which is a property of nerves, and *irritabilitas* (today called contractibility), the property of muscles. Empirical research compelled him to refute the theory of vibrations and the likening of nerves to the strings of an instrument. He contended that nerves are not solid but soft, inelastic, and not subject to tightening. Instead of vibrations, Haller cautiously advanced that all nerve action was due to an extremely moveable fluid streaming from the brain through the hollow nerves to the rest of the body.[15] As Anne Vila notes, no matter how medically sound Haller's insistence on the difference between sensibility and irritability was, or his arguing against nerve vibration, such distinctions made little difference in an era 'acutely attuned to the ways that humans respond to stimuli – whether those stimuli are organic, moral, erotic, aesthetic or intellectual'.[16] Irritability and sensibility appeared in all kinds of texts and contexts, often interchangeably, while pathological states were often explained as the result of the laxity [*Erschlaffung*] of the nerves with vibration remaining the governing mechanism of transmission.

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, for instance, Haller's French colleague and another student of Boerhaave, ignored Haller's distinction, using sensibility and irritability synonymously. In *L'homme machine* [*Man a Machine*] (1754), La Mettrie claims that everything in the human body is sensitive and hence irritable. The Swedish polymath Emmanuel Swedenborg, who greatly influenced William Blake, writes of 'tremulation', which he explains as 'the sensations of the body according to the fibres, like rays [that flash

[15] Albrecht von Haller, *First Lines of Physiology*, translated by William Cullen (Edinburgh, Charles Elliot, 1779), pp. 183-5.

[16] Vila, *Pathology*, p. 28.

into the brain]' until they reach the end of the fibres and from there 'flash into the soul'.[17] Echoing Swedenborg, the German novelist Christiane Benedikt considers sensations and thoughts to be appearances in the soul as unpredictable 'as lightning' [*ein Blitz durch seine Seele*].[18] The Italian physicist Luigi Galvani took the metaphor literally, conducting experiments on dead frogs, and making the crucial discovery that electricity is the agent of nerve and muscle action. His finding was confirmed and developed by the German physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter, for whom electricity was the unifying principle of nature inherent in all inanimate and animate matter.[19] The spark of electricity that animates Victor Frankenstein's creature in Mary Shelley's eponymous novel has its origin in this scientific discourse of the senses.[20]

The 16,000-word entry on medical sensibility in the *Encyclopédie* (1751-80) attempted to organize these burgeoning insights about the nervous system into a coherent essay. Its author, Henri Fouquet, a physician and the first Professor of internal medicine at the *École médicale de Montpellier*, was one of several *médicins philosophes* who popularized

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[17] Emmanuel Swedenborg, *The Brain, Considered Anatomically, Physiologically, and Philosophically*, ed. and trans. R. L. Tael, 2 vols (London, J. Speirs, 1883), vol. 1, p. 77.

[18] Christiane Benedikt, *Heerfort und Klärchen*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M and Leipzig, Reiffenstein, 1784), vol. 1, p. 316.

[19] W. D. Wetzel, 'Johann Wilhelm Ritter: Romantic Physics in Germany', in A. Cunningham and N. Jardine (eds), *Romanticism and the Sciences* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 199-212, p. 205.

[20] See Sarah Marsh, 'Romantic Medicine, the British Constitution, and *Frankenstein*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 64 (2015): 105-122.

sensibility.[21] Across the Channel, George Cheyne, a graduate of the Aberdeen School of medicine and Samuel Richardson's doctor, together with the surgeon John Hunter, also sought to explain the properties of sensibility.[22] While the public could read about Cheyne's experiments in his *English Malady, or a Treatise on the Spleen and Vapours* (1733), Richardson smuggled many of the ideas drawn from his correspondence with Cheyne into his novels. Fouquet's entry also illustrates the connection between medicine and prose fiction in this period, citing literary works by Homer, Ovid, Voltaire – writers deemed to be astute observers of bodily reactions. In their holistic approach to the treatment of patients that combined different significations of sensibility, physician-philosophers helped bridge the gap between medical, philosophical, anthropological, and aesthetic discourses. If their work sometimes led to the de-mystification of body responsiveness, it often also produced the opposite result.

Fouquet's entry opens with the cut-and-dry observation that sensibility entails the kind of intelligence that discerns physical objects and prompts us to approach or distance ourselves from them. He emphasizes the centripetal nature of sensibility as a property which orients the body toward the external word. As the sentient principle [*principe sensitif*], sensibility is the connector between the inner life (mechanic, cognitive, and spiritual) of the body and the external world. And yet, his entry is framed by a sense of wonderous mystery,

[21] Henri Fouquet, 'Sensibilité, Sentiment (Médecine)', in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean D'Alembert,17 tomes (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, and Durand, 1751-65), III, tome 15, pp. 38-52. My translation.

[22] See G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 3-23.

already present in the opening words, when he calls sensibility 'the basis and the preserving agent of life […] the most beautiful and singular natural phenomenon'. Sounding more like a fellow philosopher quoting Seneca, he concludes by listing sensibility among the impenetrable secrets that nature withholds even from the wise. Here, he concurs with Haller who states that not even the most painstaking empirical investigation can disclose the impact of sensibility on the body, mind, and soul.[23] One key mystery revolves around the question of how sensibility contributes to the formation of a thinking and feeling subject, in other words, to the imprint and association of ideas on the *tabula rasa* that, according to John Locke, humans were born with. The challenge of this question is taken up by Charles Bonnet, a Genevan natural historian, distinguished for his extensive study of insects.[24]

Bonnet was in regular correspondence with Haller in addition to being very-well connected in the European scientific community as member of many of the major academies. He premises his *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l'âme* [Analytic essay on the faculties of the soul] (1759) on a new fusion of sensationalist and physiological analysis that he christens psychology [*psychologie*]. Almost every page of the *Essai* refers to the anatomy of the nerves. It is from the assumption that 'we know that ideas are attached to the operations of certain fibers' that Bonnet draws a 'genealogy of sensibility'.[25] He starts with the metaphor of the statue-man, popularized by the Abbé Etienne Bonnot de Condillac and reminiscent of the statue-oracle through which gods spoke in Ancient Greece. Condillac and Bonnet's statue is

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[23] Vila, *Pathology*, p. 16.

[24] I follow here Vila's choice to single out the model proposed by Bonnet rather than Abbé de Condillac.

[25] Charles Bonnet, *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l'âme* (Copenhague, Frères Philibert, 1760), p. xiii. My translation.

turned into a sentient being not through divine speech but through the stimuli reaching it from the external world. Nervous fibres play a decisive role: Bonnet imagines these fibres to be extremely sensitive [*sensible*] but also initially undifferentiated. Differentiation, meaning specialization, starts through exposure to external stimuli, including taste, smell, touch, colour, and sound. These arouse the elementary parts of the fibre that will determine the fibre's operation. The movement of the elementary parts triggers vibrations that leave an imprint on the delicate fibre, thus modifying it to lend itself to a specific operation, say, smelling a flower. With the repetition of the stimulus, the fibre undergoes modification upon modification and produces the ability to remember. Thus, the statue-man remembers the smell of a carnation and through the faculty of recollection can differentiate it from the smell of a rose. Modification leads to differentiation and this to memory and introspection.

The statue-man is an active agent in its own destiny and, by virtue of its neurological responsiveness and malleability, becomes a feeling and thinking human being. The high malleability of the nerves leads Bonnet to conclude that humans are not passive recipients but can guide differentiation and memory. He points to two guiding interventions: first, since nervous fibres are prone to change, it is imperative that they be changed through exposure to the right stimuli. Second, because the fibres are closer to a pristine state, and therefore more impressionable in their infancy, childhood is a key formative stage. Thus, the new field of psychology emphasizes the centrality of education and childhood, two darling themes of Romanticism, perhaps nowhere as ambitiously addressed as in Rousseau's *Emile, or on Education* (1762). Bonnet attributes to the same mechanism the formation of mental faculties, thought and language, as well as ideas related to moral judgment. Understanding, which deals with moral relations, operates through the same physiological channels as sensibility, which deals with physical relations. While the differentiation of understanding entails a higher degree of sensibility than the differentiation of the senses, its generator is the nervous system,

which education modifies and trains. This morally relevant physiological response underlies monistic views of thought and feeling such as that described by the German writer Jean-Paul Richter: 'The actual body of the soul is the tree of nerves' [*Nervenbaum*].[26]

Viewing sensibility as the correspondence between fibres and ideas, that is, between the senses, mind, and soul (Bonnet maintains the existence of a Creator) opens the horizon of expectations and possibilities for both the body and intellect. Human existence can be viewed as the story of co-becoming between body and mind, both of which can be educated. In 1789, The German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach theorized this co-becoming not merely as a possibility but as a formative drive [*Bildungstrieb*], a concept that contributed to Romantic organicism but also to the development of the *Bildungsroman*.[27] All sentient organisms possess this formative drive that makes them develop toward an end goal, a final form. Teleology is already present in Bonnet's insistence on education, as well as in materialist philosopher Pierre Cabanis's collective educational project in *Travail sur l'éducation publique* [Treatise on public education] (1791) that influenced Alexander von Humboldt. The art of education [*Erziehungskunst*], which now also included public education, held sway at the end of the eighteenth century; its dream of individual perfectibility was seen as a means of improving society. The idea of an formative drive may be at the root of the campaigns for literacy which in turn enabled the movements for national emancipation in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Europe.

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[26] Jean Paul, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller (München, Hanser, 1959-63), V, p. 1179. My translation.

[27] J. F. Blumenbach, 'Über den Bildungstrieb (Nisus formativus) und seinen Einfluß auf die Generation und Reproduction', *Göttingisches Magazin der Wissenschaften und Litteratur* 1.5 (1780): 247–66.

Refinement of taste and manners

Bonnet's conclusions corroborate Louis de Jaucourt's gloss of *sensibilité morale* in the *Encyclopédie*. 'Sensibility makes a man virtuous', writes de Jaucourt, it 'is the mother of humanity and of generosity; it increases worth, it helps the spirit, and it incites persuasion'.[28] Importing the physiology of fine and impressionable nervous fibres into philosophy, the author draws a moral correspondence, referring to the 'delicate and tender disposition' of people of sensibility.[29] A passage from Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloise* (1761) illustrates the transition from physical to medical and ultimately moral sensibility. Rousseau began *Julie* after abandoning his treatise entitled *La morale sensitive, ou le matérialism du Sage* [Sensitive morality, or the Sage's materialism], meant to investigate the interaction between one's physical environment and morality. Rousseau addressed this interaction in a famous letter set in the Valais during which his hero St. Preux experiences a mountain epiphany that connects the observing subject to the surrounding world. The illuminated peaks, the shadows and chiaroscuro of the sun, morning and evening light, the proportions of objects that appear before the eye have a calming influence, so that St. Preux marvels at 'the empire that the most insensible beings hold over our most intense passions', putting to shame

[28] Chevalier de Jacourt, 'Sensibilité', in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean D'Alembert, 17 volumes (Paris, Briasson, David, Le Breton, and Durand, 1751-65), III, tome 15, p. 52.

[29] Jacourt, 'Sensibilité', p. 52.

philosophy and all its talk of the passions.[30] St. Preux takes in the landscape, inhales the air, allows impressions to sink in, and ends up noting a positive change of mood. This also enables a clear 'understanding' of the calm that he experiences: 'one approaches the ethereal spaces', where the air is 'pure and subtle, one breathes more freely, one feels lighter in the body, more serene of mind', because 'the soul contracts something of their inalterable purity'. The 'salutary and beneficial air' together with the sublime prospect harmonizes one's desires. St. Preux wonders why mountains are not appreciated as 'the principal remedies of medicine and morality', recalling Bonnet's own discussion of medicine and morality as co-continuous fields of natural philosophy.

The merger of senses, feeling, and thought results in the typically Romantic 'tendency to translate personal aesthetic experience into universal moral precept'.[31] In this spirit, Alexander von Humboldt devotes his 'Ideen zu einer Physiognomik der Gewächse' ['The Physiognomy of Plants'] (1806) to the effects that shapes, colours, and earth others have on human beings, modifying the anthropocentric (i.e., inter-human) premise of Johann Lavater's influential study of human physiognomy, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* [*Essays on Physiognomy*] (1775-78) into a relation between human beings and the environment . Humboldt's point is to raise awareness of the influences of the physical, more-than-human world on the moral realm through the

[30] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, translated and annotated by Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Hanover, New England, Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, 1997), p. 64.

[31] Joseph Luzzi, 'Did Italian Romanticism Exist?' *Comparative Literature* 56.2 (2004), 168-91, 173.

instructive, albeit arcane correspondence between the sensory and the non-sensory.[32] At the turn of the century, Wordsworth and Goethe among others called their heroes outdoors, transforming nature into a 'book full of secrets', as Kate Rigby shows at more length in chapter seven.[33] Drawing on neurophysiological vocabulary, Wordsworth writes: 'One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can'.[34]

Edinburgh's moral sense philosophers, including Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, and John Millar, also played an important role in theorizing interactions between the physical realm, morals, and aesthetics, their work often according with the empirical research described above. At the heart of their philosophy was the notion of fellow feeling. As John Dwyer suggests, the Scots readily tuned into the medical discourse on sensibility; lacking an ancient constitution or political organization like the English, 'the survival of the Scottish nation was perceived to be based almost entirely on the virtuous habits of its citizens'.[35] Translated into the moral language of virtue, sensibility could counter communal disintegration. As we already saw in chapter one, Scottish primitivism or the cultural rehabilitation of Highland values and manners, of which James McPherson's *Ossian* (1760-1763) was one expression among others, developed in response to this fear. *Ossian*'s

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[32] Alexander von Humboldt, 'Ideen zu einer Physiognomik der Gewächse' (J. G. Cotta, Tübingen, 1806), p. 14.

[33] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust. Ein Fragment* (G. J. Göschen, Leipzig, 1790), pp. 5-6.

[34] Wordsworth, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 60.

[35] John Dwyer, 'Clio and the Ethics: Practical Morality in Enlightened Scotland', *The Eighteenth-Century* 30.1 (1989): 45-72, 48.

heroes display manly virtues but also sympathize with the miseries of others, participating in an organic society, which, according to Hugh Blair, was governed by its members' mutual recognition and mediated by fellow-feeling, as opposed to those mechanical societies governed by laws that neglect their members' sentiments.[36]

To better understand how *Ossian* and its many imitations revitalized national sensibilities through imagination, we need to turn to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which undertakes to explain the workings of sensibility conveyed by the sentiment of sympathy. Sympathy is a recurring word in the literature on physiological sensibility that describes nerves as having both centripetal and receptive features. Whereas physiology deliberated on the agent behind nerve activity, wondering if it emanated from animal spirits, animal electricity, or moveable liquid, Smith's moral philosophy zeroes in on imagination as the operative principle of sympathy. He writes:

> When we read in history concerning actions of proper and beneficent greatness of mind, how eagerly do we enter into such designs? How much are we animated by that high-spirited generosity which directs them? How keen are we for their success? How grieved at their disappointment? In imagination we become the very person whose actions are represented to us.[37]

Smith foregrounds imagination as an act that connects us to others and prompts moral thought and action. For Smith, each of us is a spectator as well as an actor able to put ourselves imaginatively in the place of the other: 'By imagination […] we enter as it were into his body and become in some measure him, and thence form some idea of his

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[36] Dwyer, 'Clio', 59.

[37] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, Kinkaid and Bell, 1761), p. 125.

sensations'. Smith, nonetheless, soberly concedes that imagination allows only for imperfect and weaker replications of the sensations imagined.[38]

The wider aim of Smith's work was to show that the human propensity for fellow feeling gives rise to morality and manners. Millar, among others, continued Smith's work by subscribing to a stadial view of history that explored the intersection of morality, law, and social customs. Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), paying heed to the socio-economic modes of subsistence, argues that human societies evolved through four stages: hunting, herding, farming, and commerce. Having learned from Hutcheson the significance of familial ties, Millar takes the evolution of gender relations to be the barometer of progress. He maintains that the correlation between the rank of women and the degree of civilization depends on the influence allotted to women's 'peculiar delicacy, and sensibility'.[39] He hesitates to determine if women's 'peculiar' sensibility is grounded in the properties of the female body or in socio-economic circumstances, which signals doubts about the essentialist gendered sensibility popularized by physician-philosophers like Fouquet and Cheyne, who attributed a more sensitive (often a synonym for weaker) nervous system, and therefore acuter sensibility, to women. For Millar, women's sensibility was linked to the gratification of male sexual drives. The swifter the gratification of male impulses, the less able was sensibility to obtain social benefits. Change of modes of subsistence brought about different family and clan configurations that made the delay of male sexual gratification necessary. This gradually created space for the expansion of female sensibility that Millar considers the crucial agent in the civilizing of men.

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[38] Smith, *Theory*, p. 2.

[39] John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks: or, An Inquiry into the Circumstances which gave rise to Influence and Authority in the Different Members of Society* (1771), ed. A. Garrett (Indianapolis, IN, Liberty Fund, 2006), p. 144.

Millar's account, of course, implies that the Ossianic recasting of the past bears little resemblance to reality but is to be understood as a symptom of a welcome feminization of eighteenth-century Europe. Millar's views were corroborated by the Scottish novelist Henry Mackenzie, who held that ancient Highland society, for all its love of independence and bravery, could not have produced the refined sentiments of the 'man of feeling' that Mackenzie depicted to great acclaim in his 1771 eponymous novel. Millar's stadial methodology asserts that sensibility is not static but contingent on a socio-economic history that impacts morals and manners. Education and mutual conversation between the sexes provides the necessary stimuli for sensibility to permeate all social mores. Mackenzie's novel *Julia de Roubigné* (1777) gives women the power to cultivate moral sentiments. In Britain, women sonneteers such as Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Robinson had real life influence on their male colleagues' adoption of sensibility in their poetry.[40] Gendered sensibility also underlies the conversations between Friedrich and Dorothea Schlegel, who strove for the Romantic project of perfect communication [*vollendete Mitteilung*].[41] In these conversations, Dorothea is the interlocutor more prone to sensibility,which, in Friedrich's estimation, is a natural feature of female nature. Feminist pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft, of course, vigorously opposed this view of female nature, arguing that it implied women's physical weakness and by extension their weaker rational capabilities.[42]

A literature of Sensibility

[40] Nagle, *Sexuality*, pp. 45-68.

[41] Mergenthaler, 'Frühromantik', 302-321.

[42] Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, '"Mistaken Notions of Female Excellence": Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of Virtue', *Called to Civil Existence: Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, ed. E. K. Steiner (Amsterdam, Brill, 2014), pp. 93-112.

A work that accentuated the connections between the physical world and a feminized aesthetic life was Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), a fictional travelogue indebted to the sentimental style of another pan-European phenomenon, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). Capitalizing on the self's immediate and visceral responsiveness to seemingly trivial stimuli, Sterne stimulated the genre of sentimental travel and the literary type of the sentimental traveller. His model favoured digression, fragmentation, irony and incompleteness that were carried on in novels such as Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*, in the Romantic fragment, of which Byron may be the most imitated practitioner, in the improvisatory quality of works like Alexander Pushkin's *Yevgeniy Onegin* [*Eugene Onegin*] (1825-1837), as well as in the non-linearity of Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi* [*The Betrothed*, 1827-42], where digressive narration mediates the interweaving of personal and historical fortunes.[43] Sterne's sentimental traveller remains ingrained in the romanticism of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *Sentimental Education* (1869), novels (to Flaubert's exasperation) dubbed realist fiction. *A Sentimental Journey* made British novels even more popular among Continental readers. With Richardson's and Sterne's success in mind, Germaine de Staël's *On Literature* (1800) argues that British literature, and especially the British novel, conveys the insights of that nation's moral philosophers, and associates the new aesthetics of 'private affections and moral dilemmas' with its valorisation of women.[44]

Sterne's novel promoted the feminization of culture also because he thought it agreed with the refined manners of civil society. His protagonist Yorick, a believer in the almost

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[43] Sona Stephan Hoisington, '*Onegin*: An Inverted Byronic Poem', *Comparative Literat*ure 27.2 (1975): 136-52, 141.

[44] Fabienne Moore, 'Early French Romanticism', in Michael Ferber (ed.), A *Companion to European Romanticism* (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2005), pp.172-91, p. 181.

infallible rectitude of one's first impulses, advances a moral sense generated by 'a true feminine heart' – the opposite of a 'torpid' one – that acts benevolently prior to the intervention of the brain, which is often encumbered by norms and pragmatic deliberations.[45] The heart emerges as the instrument responsible for the self's adequate tuning to its surroundings. If we take Carlo Porta's definition to be representative of Italian Romanticism, then the heart was writ large on the movement's banner. In Porta's 'Il Romanticismo' (1819), poetry derives its pleasure from the magic produced by 'all the passions held hidden in our hearts'.[46] Before Porta, François René de Chateaubriand had diagnosed the restless *mal-de-vivre* of suicidal characters such as Atala in the defective heart, 'a lyre lacking strings', while Alphonse de Lamartine would later boast that his *Méditations poétiques* (1820) had replaced the seven-string lyre of the Classical (female) muse with the fibres of a human heart, which Lamartine had 'touched and shaken by the innumerable shudderings of the soul and nature'.[47] Refining this gendered paradigm, Jean Paul's novel *Titan* (1800-1803) conceives of the hardening and stiffening of the heart as a male phenomenon [*männliche Verstockung und Herzens-Starrsucht*].[48] Like Millar, Mackenzie and Jean Paul, Sterne depicts women as compelling men 'to model a different conversation' that dispenses with words and leaves

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[45] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, ed. Katherine Turner (Peterborough, Broadview, 2010), p. 73.

[46] Qtd. in Piero Garofalo, 'Romantic Poetics in an Italian Context', in Michael Ferber (ed)., A *Companion to European Romanticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 238-55, p. 246.

[47] Chateaubriand, François-René, *Atala. René*, translated by Irving Putter (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), p. 80; Jonathan Strauss, 'The Poetry of Loss: Lamartine, Musset, and Nerval', in Ferber (ed)., *Companion*, pp. 192-207, p. 192.

[48] Jean Paul, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Norbert Miller (Munich, Hanser, 1959-63), III, p. 454.

communication to the sensible bodies emancipated from language. Yorick meticulously describes the mechanism of one such conversation: 'The pulsation of the arteries along my fingers pressing across hers, told her what was passing with me'.[49] This is Sterne's answer to Schlegels' Romantic project of perfect communication [*vollendete Mitteilung*]. However, while *A Sentimental Journey* toys with a biological determination of the feminine heart, a freely weeping Yorick draws on gender norms in order to confound them when he confesses: 'I am weak as a woman, and I beg the world not to smile but to pity me'.[50] Traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary holding the battered body of her crucified son, the feminized passion of pity was reinterpreted in British Romanticism by William Blake's colour print 'Pity' (c. 1795), featuring a female cherub bending over the body of a woman and carrying her infant child into the heavenly realm.

The universal pity that Yorick solicits from readers is meant to engender bonds of friendship by drawing on the imaginary likeness and kinship that Adam Smith had attributed to sympathy. Yorick is more optimistic than Smith, making friendship the outcome of sympathy when he asks readers 'are we not all relations?'[51] Fittingly, Ugo Foscolo, the matchless Italian translator of *A Sentimental Journey*, referred to Sterne as 'my dear friend Lorenzo Sterne', and his *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortiz* [*The Last Letter of Jacopo Ortiz*] (1802), written under the sign of friendship, is addressed to the protagonist's friend and

[49] Sterne, *Sentimental*, p. 73.

[50] Sterne, *Sentimental*, p. 75.

[51] Sterne, *Sentimental*, p. 121.

confidant Lorenzo.[52] Critics of sentimental literature often ridiculed this invocation to friendship. For example, the Dutch author of theological and pedagogical works Willem Emery de Penponcher, in a benignly satirical vein, addresses readers meant to be cured of the excesses of sensibility as 'Thou, my sentimental friend',[53] whereas Jane Austen wrote 'Love and Freindship' (1790-1869) as a tongue-in-cheek satire of sensibility's cult of friendship.

In the first, canon-making anthology of British novels compiled by Anna Laetitia Barbauld in 1810, Sterne receives praise for writing a successful novel containing his particular brand of physiological and moral sensibility: 'It is the peculiar characteristic of this writer, that he affects the heart, not by long drawn tales of distress, but by light electric touches which thrill the nerves of the reader who possesses a correspondent sensibility of frame'.[54] It was such investigation of the sensible body and sensible mind that enabled the kind of identification between characters and readers, in which psychology could substitute for plot, and sensuous life for event. The shift of emphasis from an event to the registering of thoughts and feelings spawned by said event is posited in William Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1800), and was theorized a few years earlier in Friedrich Schiller's 'Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung' ['On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry'] (1795-6). While naïve art depicts events, characters, and objects, sentimental art '*reflects* on the

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[52] Olivia Santovetti, 'The Sentimental, the 'Inconlusive, the Digressive: Sterne in Italy', in Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer (eds), *The Reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe* (London and New York, Continuum, 2004), pp. 193-220, p. 198.

[53] Annemieke Meijer, *The Pure Language of the Heart: Sentimentalism in the Netherlands 1775-1800* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1998), p. 74

[54] Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *The British Novelists: With an Essay, and Prefaces, Biographical and Critical* (London, Rivington, 1820), I, p. 39.

impression' that these events, characters, and objects engender in the perceiving and experiencing self.[55] The self becomes the event, and meditation rather than imitation the *modus operandi* of sentimental art. Hence, despite individual, chronological, and national differences, the literature of sensibility can be assessed as a literature of process rather than of product.[56] This also qualifies, as we see in chapter five, for Gothic literature, whose atmospheric style, and explorations of mood [*Stimmung*] rely on processes of subjective perception and epistemology.

A Sentimental Journey was translated in French and German within a year, and by the second decade of the nineteenth century was available in Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Swedish, and Danish. Sterne's influence on German literature has been deemed even greater than upon his native audience.[57] Herder, Jacobi, Mendelssohn, Schiller, and Kant read him, among others. Interestingly, these translations raised new questions regarding the definition of 'sentimental' in the title. The German translation prompted the creation of a new adjective, *empfindsam*. The writer and art critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had suggested the word to the translator, Johann Joachim Christoph Bode, who thought that 'sentimental' was Sterne's invention and, therefore, deserved a new word in German to echo

[55] Friedrich Schiller, *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (Vienna, Karl Graefer, 1888), p. 26.

[56] Northrop Frey, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1963), p. 133.

[57] Laurence Marsden Price, *English Literature in Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1953), p. 193.

the originality of Sterne's genius.[58] Lessing drew on existing adjectival forms: if *mühsam* could be derived from *Mühe*, then *empfindsam* might be drawn from *Empfindung* [sensation]. This was an expansion on the philosophy of sensibility provided by Moses Mendelssohn's *Briefe über die Empfindungen* [*Letters on the Sensations*] (1755). In France, the word 'sentimental' did not exist. The first translator Joseph Pierre Frénais felt compelled to explain that 'the English word sentimental could not be rendered into French by any expression which agreed exactly with it, and it has been left to stand as it is'.[59] Sentimentality struck the French as distinctly English. A French reviewer, however, instructed readers that Sterne's 'sentimental' derived from 'the most tender sensibility [*sensibilité*]: this is what had led him to call his work "sentimental"'.[60] The first Spanish adaptation of Sterne's travelogue made the same connection visible in the title *El viajador sensible* (1791), whereas the Dutch 'sentimenteel' was coined in the translation of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in 1776, and made popular thanks to his *Sentimenteele Reis* (1778).

Twenty years after the appearance of Sterne's *Journey* in Germany, Samuel Johann Ernst Stoch complained that, in the wake of Yorick, the German public was misusing the term *empfindsam*, and that it needed to be restricted to the depiction of a person prone to

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[58] Duncan Large, '"Lorenz Sterne" among German philosophers: Reception and Influence', *Textual Practice* 31.2 (2017): 283-97.

[59] Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 10.

[60] Alan B. Howes (ed.), *Sterne: The Critical Heritage* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 388.

lively feelings, and whose heart takes tender interest in a variety of situations.[61] *A Sentimental Journey* had an immediate influence on the writers associated with the *Sturm und Drang* movement, who contributed to the cult of the heart and of friendship. Yorick provided the template, readily weeping over the body of a dead donkey, mourning the passing of a generous monk and musing that, if placed in a desert beyond the reach of civilization, he would partake in the imagined pains and pleasures of plants: 'I would fasten them [my affections] upon some sweet myrtle, or seek some melancholy cypress to connect myself to […] I would teach myself to mourn, and when they rejoiced, I would rejoice along with them'.[62] The will to educate one's sensibility is central here, promising Horatian instruction and delight. Almost half a century later, Byron had internalized this lesson when identifying the lake's smooth surface with the face of a lover ('Lac Léman woes me with its crystal face'), whereas Wordsworth would recall the yellow of a colony of daffodils 'flash[ing] upon that inward eye', unleashing the heart's breezy dance with the flowers.[63] Comparable sensitivity marks Goethe's *Werther*, when Werther and his beloved Lotte, in tearful reverie, look out of the window at the thundering sky and provide each other with literary cues that render them more than mere spectators. Pointedly, the cue comes from a poem by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, a significant voice in the German cult of friendship. His 'Die Frühlingsfeier' ['Spring Rites'], a hymn to the regenerative powers of a divinely sanctioned natural world, is the textual impetus for Lotte's tears and Werther's precipitation into 'a

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[61] Cited in Gerhard Sauder (ed.), *Theorie der Empfindsamkeit und des Sturm und Drang* (Stuttgart, Reclam, 2003), p. 42. My translation.

[62] Sterne, *Sentimental*, p. 82.

[63] George Gordon Byron, *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Alice Levine (New York and London, Norton & Company, 2010), p. 215; Wordsworth, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 418.

stream of sensations'.[64] Here, not a melancholy cypress, an elegiac topos since the Antiquity, but the 'blessed rain' sung by Klopstock that mediates human affections and the characters' immersion in the landscape. Hands touching hands, and tears calling forth tears heighten the synergies between nature and art, making sensory experience an intersubjective, but also self-consciously literary event.

'Are we not all relations?'

An important line of Romantic thinking derives the necessity for an all-inclusive sympathy based on the capacity for suffering, what we today would label as humanitarianism.[65] Sterne's narrative makes it clear, for instance, that attaching oneself affectionately to 'some sweet myrtle' or 'melancholy cypress' includes but did not limit itself to the love of plants. In his prose fragment 'On Love' (1828), British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley extrapolates from this passage in Sterne's narrative an all-encompassing, cosmophilic principle that underwrites our kinship and affiliation with all living things.[66] He argues that our human essence dies if and when the power to sympathize dies within us. Without sympathy, Shelley declares, 'man becomes the living sepulchre of himself'.[67] Margaret Brose makes a similar assertion regarding the Italian Romantic poets Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi: for them,

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[64] J. W. Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (Stuttgart, Reclam, 2004), p. 30. My translation.

[65] See Enit Karafili Steiner, 'Mary Wollstonecraft's "Love of Mankind" and Cosmopolitan Suffering', *Studies in Romanticism* 58.1 (2019): 3-26.

[66] Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe* (San Francisco, Berre-Koehler, 2009), p. 10.

[67] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat, (New York and London, Norton, 2002), p. 504.

consciousness is not merely mimetic, but forms 'an interior landscape of emotions and pathos'.[68] For Leopardi, the 'gentle' broom flower that sprouts in the wasteland of the ruins of Pompeii 'as if commiserating the sorrows of others', is a reminder of the unity and solidarity that the poet longs to see active among humans. The implication that the power of sympathy needs cultivation gives rise to a lyrical consciousness that must imagine that which contains and exceeds the self's personal, first-hand experience. Plants, but also prisoners, slaves, children born and unborn, the healthy and the unhealthy, animals and insects become poetic protagonists

Inhabiting such consciousness, Werther longs for a shift of perspective by shaking off his human form and entering the body of a cockchafer beetle so that he can partake of the spring's fragrances. Rousseau includes animals in his *Discours sur l'inégalité* [*Discourse on Inequality*] (1754) as co-possessors of natural rights based on their corporeal sensibility [*la sensibilité dont ils sont doués*] that obliges humans to perform certain duties towards them.[69] Mindful of these duties, Jeremy Bentham anticipates the advent of animal rights in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), maintaining that animal suffering has equal moral weight as human suffering; both ultimately are forms of protest against tyranny. As Kate Rigby also points out in chapter seven, Barbauld's poem 'The Mouse's Petition' (1773) is particularly pertinent not only for its politically framed title, but also for denouncing the exploitation of animals for the purposes of scientific research (ironically, the kind that yielded the neurological knowledge sketched at the start of this

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[68] Margaret Brose, 'Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi: Italy's Classical Romantics', in Ferber (ed.), *A Companion*, pp. 256-75, p. 274.

[69] J.J. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, ed. Jean Starobinski (Paris, Gallimard, 1985), p. 56.

essay). Parliament responded with an 'Act to prevent the cruel and improper Treatment of Cattle' in 1822, which made Britain the first country to take legal steps towards animal rights.

The culture of sensibility also helped transform the discourse on disabled persons. For example, to the revulsion of illustrious contemporaries, Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy', published in 1798, weaves a moving tale around a mother and her mentally impaired son. Creating emotional suspense with the help of both physiological and Gothic vocabulary, tempered with touches Sternean humour and sensibility, Wordsworth is able to capture the anxiety of the mother, who fears that her son has gotten lost in the woods, but also the son's 'glorious' return to tell his 'story […] like a traveller bold'.[70] We also find mental simplicity appreciated with poetic delicacy by French poet and fiction writer Marceline Debordes-Valmore's *Sarah* (1821). 'The most naïve heart has its secret and seeks a confiding heart in which to pour the disquietude that astounds it', insists the narrator before introducing the main characters: the white child Sarah and Arsène, her black male guardian.[71] Starting with this inclusive rhetorical gesture, this novella confronts the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean, defending the Africans' equal humanity and right to freedom at a time where French abolitionists were increasingly active. Sympathy even enables Anna Letitia Barbauld to imagine the impenetrable existence of the unborn child in the mother's womb with an awe that draws on the discourse of the nervous system: 'What powers lie folded in thy curious frame, – / Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!'(lines 5-

[70] Wordsworth, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 56, ll. 457-63.

[71] Marceline Debordes-Valmore, 'Sarah', in Marc Bertrand (ed.), *Huit Femmes* (Geneva, Droz, 1999), p. 22. My translation.

6).[72] The fetus, albeit incapable of language to assert its rights, is of divine provenance and already possesses a life that endows it with 'lofty claims' (line 7).

More political 'reform' movements, including prison reform and the abolition of slavery, drew heavily on sensibility as well. Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* imagines the fate of millions of captive people, then, for the sake of self-preservation, abruptly shifts its attention to a single captive. In spite of this reduction of scope, the sensory input conjured imaginatively –'the iron enter[ing] into his [the captive's] soul'— protagonist Sterne's hero and readers alike.[73] In the wake of Yorick but also of philanthropist John Howard, the mental and physical cruelties of incarceration became a common literary theme.[74] Pierre Blanchard's *Le Rêveur Sentimental* [*The Sentimental Dreamer*] (1795), for example, applies Rousseau's technique of reverie or mental travel to the disconsolate situation of a prisoner in the midst of the French Revolution. Byron popularized the theme two decades later in 'The Prisoner of Chillon' (1816), a poem on the imprisonment and mental torture of three brothers that directly informed Pushkin's *Kavkázskiy plénnik* [*The Prisoner of the Caucasus*] (1822), even if the latter enacts its distance from Romantic aesthetics by refusing to represent an imagined interiority. Next to Foscolo and Manzoni, who read and adopted Sterne, Carlo Bini, a member of the democratic wing of the Italian *Risorgimento*, drafted *Il manoscritto di un prigioniero* [*The Manuscript of a Prisoner*] (1833) in prison, a homodiegetic account that explores the condition of incarceration through Sterne's 'double register of irony and

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[72] Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'To the Little Invisible Being who is Expected soon to become Invisible', in D.L. Macdonald and Anne McWhir (eds), *The Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period* 1770-1832, (Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2010), p. 113.

[73] Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*, p. 127.

sentimental reflection'.[75] Along similar lines, Gabriela Hartvig reminds us that the earliest Hungarian translation of *A Sentimental Journey* occurred in the cell of a political convict, a fact that has ever since linked Sterne's Hungarian reception and the revolutionary cause against the Habsburg monarchy.[76]

Slavery was of course another, even more inhuman form of captivity, one that haunted colonial Europe and gave rise to a huge body of literature. In *The Wealth of the Nations* (1776), Adam Smith had challenged the capacity of white masters to sympathize with the slaves, and the capacity of slave-labour to ensure sustainable profit. Both these insights played a decisive role in British abolitionist discourse, undermining both the economic and 'ameliorist' justifications of slavery, and helping pass the Abolitionist bill in 1806. [77] The argument for the abolition of slavery on humane grounds deserves attention because it drew strength from the culture of sensibility and produced a distinct branch of literature across Europe, the slave narrative. Constructed as a physical and spiritual journey, these narratives both relied on and developed readers' moral sensibility. On Josiah Wedgwood's famed medallion minted for the 1787 anti-slavery campaign, Yorick's 'Are we not all relations?' became 'Am I not a man and a brother?' In 1831, *The History of Mary*

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[75] Santovetti, 'Sentimental', p. 205.

[76] Gabriela Hartvig, 'Sterne in Hungary', in Voogd and Neubauer (eds), *The Reception of Laurence Sterne*, pp. 180-92, p. 180.

[77] David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783-1807* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 181-3: see, also. *The Substance of the Debates on the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade, Which was Brought into the House of Lords on the 2d January, 1807, and into the House of Commons on the 10th of February, 1807, and which was finally passed into a Law on the 25th March, 1807* (London, W. Phillips, 1808), p. 103.

Prince, a Bermuda-born slave, claimed the humanity of the black body on the authority of that great sensorium of sensibility, the heart: 'Oh the Buckra people [i.e. whites] who keep slaves think that black people are like cattle, without natural affection. But my heart tells me it is far otherwise'.[78] For Prince, feeling is the agent of economic and political emancipation. As we see in Janet Schaw's *Journal of a Voyage to the West Indies* (1776), however, whites Europeans could be well-versed in the era's sentimental discourse yet still refuse to acknowledge the humanity of their black slaves. Like Shaw's *Journal* – which denies slaves the possession of human sensations – pro-planter and ameliorist literature highlighted the benevolence of white masters with the aid of sentimental tropes, constituting a challenge to abolitionists.

Abolitionist literature needed to foster a politically minded culture of sensibility, while simultaneously alerting readers to the limits of a politics based on sympathy as spectacle, as already intimated by Sterne.[79] Poems like Hannah More's 'Sensibility', quoted at the beginning of this essay, arose in connection to the abolitionist cause that More endorsed passionately. A means to reconcile the goals of abolitionist culture was to activate not only a spectatorial but also a thoughtful practice of pity that had its roots in the reflexivity of the body. Pity had been described by Descartes in *Passions of the Soul* (1649) as 'a kind of mourning mixed with love or good will towards those whom we see suffering an undeserved evil'.[80] Abolitionist literature sought to impress on the public how evil slavery was, notably

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[78] Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, edited by Moira Ferguson (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 61.

[79] Festa, *Figures*, p. 154.

[80] René Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme*, (Amsterdam, Louys Elzevier, 1649), p. 251. My translation.

by showing situations in which slaves acted in a humane way, rendering such an institution undeserved, reprehensible, and immoral. In a 1786 report on the slave revolt on the Danish slave ship 'Christiansborg', the German botanist Paul Erdmann Isert emphasizes the fear experienced by Africans at the hands of European traders. Isert, without sentimental ornaments, posits the humanity of the terror-stricken slaves by bringing to the fore African perceptions of Europeans, present in the 'multitude of frightful tales' that circulate among Africans about whites.[81] 'A slave once asked me, in full seriousness', relates Isert 'if the shoes that I wore were not made of the skin of Negroes. For he had noticed that my shoes were of the same colour as his skin. Others say that we eat the slaves and make gunpowder out of their bones'.[82] The collective 'we' enlists Isert and all Europeans in what readers would recognize as acts of savagery that discredit their perception of Europe as a civilization of refined manners and morals.

This prosaic account of the slaves' foreknowledge of European cruelty is complemented by Isert's lyrically inquisitive response to the undoing of humanity in the slave-labouring colony of Danish Guinea founded in 1658:

> The atrocious toil and the beatings in conjunction with a wretched diet soon combine either to kill the slave or else leave him completely deformed, he who was once so well built. Oh, what were you before? And what are you now?[83]

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[81] Paul Erdmann Isert, *Reise nach Guinea und den Caribäischen Inseln in Columbien, in Briefen an seine Freunden beschreiben* (Copenhagen, J. Morthorft, 1788), p. 306-7. My translation.

[82] Isert, *Reise*, p. 307.

[83] Isert, *Reise*, p. 336.

Destabilized by memories of ill treatment 'beyond all that is human', Isert inserts himself in the text as a sensible spectator, his horror mediated by the dashes: 'I saw – Oh! that I had never seen it! –'[84] Sterne made the dash into a marker of immediacy, incompleteness, and ineffability. As with Goethe, Austen, Byron, Pushkin, and many other Romantic-period writers, the dash in Isert's text signals the heart-felt quality of his language. Isert's anti-slavery testimony helped sway Danish Minister Ernst Schimmelmann's appointment of a committee to investigate the slave trade, resulting in a royal edict against the trading of slaves between Danish Guinea and Danish West-Indies, and making Denmark-Norway the first European country to outlaw slavery in 1792.[85]

Ambivalent Sensibility

Sensibility also played an important role in another important ideological controversy, the French Revolution, an event that divided sentimental writers and demonstrated the concept's ambivalent applications in the political and social realm. Often, the very same people who had upheld sensibility to argue the slaves' claim to freedom and possession of their bodies, branded the Revolution as blood-thirsty savagery. The most eloquent attack came from Edmund Burke, who although sympathetic to the abolitionist agenda and the American Revolution, vehemently condemned the overthrow of monarchic rule in France in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1791). Burke controversially adopts the language of sensibility to argue a reactionary position. For Burke saw the Revolution as an assault on the natural

[84] Isert, *Reise*, p. 332.

[85] See Joseph Evans Loftin Jr., 'The Abolition of the Danish Atlantic Slave Trade', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Louisiana State University (1977).

moral sentiments of the French and by extension of European civilizations: the revolutionaries 'without opening one new avenue to the understanding, […] have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart. They have perverted in themselves, and in those that attend to them, all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast'.[86] The heart again is the sensorium be consulted but is here appropriated for the anti-revolutionary cause.

Mary Wollstonecraft, who had written a protest novel, *Mary: The Wrongs of Women* (1788) in the sentimental vein, and was likened by William Godwin to Werther, was all but insensitive to Burke's appropriation of the idiom of the heart. Conversant with and at times critical of the gendered aspects of Scottish stadial theory, she explains the violence of the Revolution as emanating from the imperfect development of European civilization, which had entrenched inequalities 'fatal to moral and civic virtue'.[87] She objects to the fact that Burke has hijacked the language of a common humanity to deviously argue that inequality is part of the natural order of things. Appearing as 'a man of feeling', Burke is shocked by the March on Versailles on 5 October 1789, particularly the seizure of the Queen's quarters by the Parisian *poissardes*. His compassion for the symbolic rape of the Queen made revolutionary sensibility appear to many Britons as a perversion of natural feeling. In a satirical print entitled 'New Morality', published in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* in 1798, sensibility is portrayed as a haggard woman who weeps over a dead bird, an allusion to Sterne's Yorick, with a copy of Rousseau in hand and the decapitated head of Louis XVI underfoot. Chris Jones suggests that the revolution unravelled three strands of sensibility that

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[86] Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981-89), VIII, p.115.

[87] Daniel O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), p. 19.

had hitherto coexisted with ease, often within the same text: ‘the potentially radical, the conservative, and the self-indulgent’.88 The terror and violence of the Revolution, viewed with dismay even by many of its supporters, lent moral urgency to the question: what is the right sensibility?

A debate between the Dutch literati Willem de Perponcher and Rhijnvis Feith helps us better understand the question at stake. Feith, a poet, novelist, and admirer of Sterne, defended sensibility in a dispute with Perponcher, who held sensibility in high esteem, calling it a divine gift which gives rise many virtues, but warning that it also inspires dangerous self-absorption, feeding readers with self-indulgent, extravagant ideals which an imperfect world cannot satisfy. [89] The sensible reader that Perponcher warily pictures is an imitator of Werther, a spiritual sibling of Romanticism’s long list of disenchanted victims of *Weltschmerz*, from Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Anton Reiser* (1785-1790) to Pushin’s *Onegin*. Pushkin, with ironic gusto, calls Onegin’s estrangement ‘A malady, the cause of which / ‘tis high time were discovered / similar to the English spleen – / in short, the Russian chondria’ due to which the protagonist ‘toward life became quite cold’.[90] This is exactly what Penponcher feared: a diseased imagination leads to social withdrawal, to the weakening of the body and the very affective bonds that the reader of sentimental fiction purports to seek in

[88] Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 15.

[89] Meijer, *Pure*, pp. 72-101.

[90] Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, translated by Vladimir Nabokov, 4 vols (New York, Bollingen Foundation, 1964), vol.1, p. 38.

the more-than-human world.[91] The only sensibility Penponcher endorses in good conscience is a conservative one that promotes social harmony and political acquiescence.

Feith on the other hand defends sensibility using a hypothetical narrative which, like Bonnet's statue, illustrates the role of *Bildung*. He asks readers to imagine a young man growing in a business environment, removed from the stimuli necessary to cultivate his potential for higher perfection [*hogere volmaaktheid*]. Exposure to the literature of sensibility inspires him to seek more sensitive, compassionate company, and ultimately to better his condition. Feith, thus, undermines the assumption that sensibility inevitably leads to misanthropy as well as the misguided expectation that people remain content within their place in society and resist change. Literature, he argues, would disappear if it negated human aspiration, while literary giants such as Shakespeare would have nothing to say if 'no one ever wishes to transcend their daily circumstances'.[92] Clearly, Feith's argument rests on his relaxed trust in the relationship between readers and the literature of sensibility.

Goethe addresses this relationship more ambivalently in *Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* [*The Triumph of Sentimentality*] (1777), a satirical play and reaction to his own success as the author of *Werther*. The play was performed less than two weeks after the dead body of a woman with a copy of *Werther* in her pocket was retrieved from the river Ilm. In the play, a young Prince falls in love with a married Queen and gets caught up in an erotic triangle not unlike *Werther*'s. The object of the satire is the gap between things as they are and things as the play's lovers wish them to be. For Werther the incompatibility between the actual world, with Lotte as a married woman, and his aspiration to be united with her proves unbearable. Only death puts an end to this divided consciousness that renders him, in Schiller's definition,

[91] Meijer, *Pure*, p. 73.

[92] Meijer, *Pure*, p. 77.

a sentimental figure. In contrast, the Prince in Goethe's play breaches the gap opened by unattainable love by devoting his life to an inanimate a doll crafted in the Queen's likeness. The Pygmalion motif – also explored in Rousseau's eponymous monodrama in 1752, E.T.A. Hoffman's 'Sandman' (1816) and Joseph von Eichendorff's 'The Marble Statue' (1818) – turns ambivalently satirical when we learn that the doll's body is stuffed with sentimental literature, including *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. At the end of the play, the Prince's love for the artefact replacing his love for the living Queen cannot be remedied, a fact that makes Goethe both a favourite of and a critic of the sensible reader. Yet the play begs the question who that reader might be, indicating-Goethe's anxiety of reception, which is part and parcel of the Romantic effort to construct an ideal readership by guiding readers' sensibility.[93]

The Pygmalion-motif points to the common, but problematic connection between sensibility and narcissism. Residual narcissism underpins Adam Smith's account of sympathetic imagination, in which the self remains at the centre of sympathetic acts, since we can never escape our own experience, no matter how genuine our effort to identify with the Other. Goethe's play unravels Schiller's distinction between two types of imagination, the 'naïve' one that imitates, and the 'sentimental' one that creates by reflecting on one's feelings and perceptions.[94] The Queen's monologue at the end of the play impersonates the mythical

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[93] Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 80.

[94] See John P. Heins, 'Sentimental Confusion: Art, Nature, and Aesthetic Autonomy in Goethe's *Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit*', *Goethe Yearbook* 14 (2006): 83-101, 86. lmut Ammerlahn, 'Vom Püppchen zum Liebchen, vom Schatten zur erkennenden Frau: Ironische und therapeutische Selbstinszenierungen der dichterischen Phantasie in Goethes 'Anti-Werther-Dramen *Lila* und *Triumph der Empfindsamkeit*', in *Analogen Rationis:*

Proserpina by reflecting on their common fate as captives. Sara Vandegrift Eldridge suggests that we read this monologue, a lament on Proserpina's abduction by Hades, as a 'response to the impossibility for women in the late eighteenth century to control their own destinies'.[95] Its counterpart is the imitating imagination of Goethe's Prince, producing a narcissistic male self who finds fulfilment in the inanimate reflection of his own desires. Comparably, Pushkin subjects Onegin to satirical censure when Tatiana discovers highlighted Byronic passages in Onegin's books. She and the reader are left to doubt the existence of an authentic Onegin underneath the Pygmalion figure put together with the help of literature.

In *Valperga* (1823), a novel characteristic of late Romanticism, Mary Shelley pushes sensibility to its sinister conclusion. Here, the character of Castruccio masters the mechanisms of sympathetic imitation: to penetrate others' dispositions and adapt to them, forging connections of friendship in every situation. Castruccio has something of the chameleon-like adaptability that John Keats hails as the distinctive trait of poetic genius. For Keats, total adaptation to the foul and fair, in other words, complete identification with moral light or darkness makes the real poet a self-less being. In Mary Shelley's novel, such identification is far from selfless. Castruccio's 'frankness of behaviour' and 'apparent nobleness of nature' hide 'the craft of a grey-haired courtier, and even at times the cruelty of

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Festschrift für Gerwin Marahrens zum 65. Geburtstag (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1994), pp. 111-28, p. 111-14.

[95] Sara Vandegrift Eldridge, 'Fissures of Empfindsamkeit: Tonal Shifts and Literary Depictions of Femininity in Goethe and Wezel', *Women in German Yearbook* 33 (2017), pp. 1-27, p. 20.

a falling tyrant'.[96] This is sensibility taken hostage by a calculating 'craft' associated with the *ancien régime*; it is the Romantic doppelgänger of that human potential that de Jaucourt in the *Encyclopédie* had called 'the mother of humanity'. *Valperga* rehearses the controversies of the French Revolution, showing that what rendered sensibility distinct – idiom, body language, expectations – could be adopted, hollowed out and instrumentalized to harbour tyrannical self-interest. The numerous imitations of Sterne's *Journey* and Goethe's *Werther* codified, fixed, and ultimately commodified sensibility, reducing it to mere surface. To say it with Novalis, we are directed toward the original significations of the world and all it contains by a process of romanticization that gives 'the common a higher meaning, the everyday a mysterious semblance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the appearance of the infinite'. Deprived of the wonderous interplay between the senses and moral edification, a propensity that for many had a divine provenance, sensibility becomes a lower, finite version of itself.[97]

Writers like Mary Shelley or Goethe are best understood as writing against sensibility's false prophets. Percy Shelley, in whose writing poetic and prophetic vocation converge, offers a striking representation of the false prophet in *Alastor, Or the Spirit of Solitude* (1816). Leaving 'his cold fireside and alienated home', Shelley's poet-protagonist sets out in search of a communion with the more-than-human world (line 76). The journey, conceived as an allegory of the mind and of reading, confronts the poet with unknown geographies, fallen civilizations and historical commotions – a panoply of impressions meant

[96] Mary Shelley, *Valperga, Or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. Stuart Curran (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 132-33.

[97] P. Kluckhohn and R. Samuel (eds), *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (Darmstadt, 1968), vol.2, p. 543. Novalis calls romanticization 'a qualitative potentization'.

to expand the 'spirit of sweet human love' (line 203). Ironically, the opposite occurs: Alastor spurns the hospitality of foreign cottagers and the care of an Arab girl, pining instead for an unnamed, 'veiled maid', a Pygmalion-like figment of the poet who 'images himself the Being whom he loves'.[98] Obsessed with the phantom of the imaginary beloved, the poet dies a lonely death after a life that evaded what it set out to find and could have found in other human beings. While, this is the very problem addressed above by Perponcher, Shelley warns us of the physical and spiritual degeneration that occurs when a solipsistic sensibility blocks out the 'ephemeral, contingent, sympathetic' exchanges, the *Wechselwirkung* or reciprocity of intersubjective encounters: 'the Poet's blood, / that ever beat in mystic sympathy with nature's ebb and flow, grew feebler still' (lines 651-3).[99] Alastor experiences the death Shelley mentions in his essay 'On Love'.

Acutely tuned to the neurophysiological discourse that opened this essay, the poem confronts the stakes of sensibility: in the absence of human connections, the innate potential for universal compassion atrophies and with it the fibre of ethical thinking: the failure of sympathy leads to a failure of moral judgment. One of the many legacies of the Romantic culture of sensibility was to plant the Kantian dare-to-know (*sapere aude*) in the physical, more-than-human network of dare-to-feel (*sentire aude*), an ordering that Wollstonecraft, for all her critique of superficial sensibility, expresses with poignancy: 'We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel'.[100] With a similar certitude and conviction that there is a right and false sensibility, Feith rejects the moral superiority of rationalism, writing that 'the more refined

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[98] Shelley, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 73.

[99] Andrew Warren, *The Orient and the Young Romantics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 138.

[100] Wollstonecraft, *Residence*, p. 171.

Feeling is, the fewer mistakes it makes about the value of things'.[101] Much Romantic literature strives for the refinement of feeling that can creatively reflect on our concomitant blindness, fallibilities, and false prophecies. At its best, the discourse of sensibility helped writers move away from disembodied reason, offering instead the alternative of an all-encompassing syncretic correspondence of feeling and reason that enmeshes humans in cosmophilic processes of co-becoming, or what Herder calls the promotion of humanity [*Beförderung der Humanität*].[102]

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[101] Qtd. in Meijer, *Pure*, p. 33.

[102] Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik: Eine deutsche Affäre* (München, C.Hanser Verlag, 2007), p. 23

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