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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORD 'SENTIMENTAL'

Martin Krejza

The eighteenth century witnessed a dramatic change in the way man looked on the world and himself. The focus shifted from God to Nature and mankind as the only subject of enquiry. It can be said that on the whole the eighteenth century thought well of man and it was generally accepted that men were naturally benevolent, sociable, and sympathetic. It was their inalienable right to exercise their own moral judgements and make their own moral sentiments. Although the stress, which at the beginning of the century was placed on Reason in the Reason-and-Feeling complex, was eventually put on Feeling as the only legitimate source of our moral sentiments (the turning point being the 1750's and David Hume), moral sentiments always had a strong connotation of rationality. The proper human moral sentiment is always a reasonable feeling and must be filtered through the principal human faculty – Reason – before it is accepted as valid by the Man of Virtue. Feeling in the Wordsworthian sense of the word, so widespread in the age of Romanticism, was rejected and called mere 'enthusiasm'.

The notion of a reasonable feeling is deeply ambiguous and explains both its immense popularity, which found its most powerful means in the rapid development of the novel, and its decline, which is vividly illustrated in the changes undergone by the word 'sentimental' and related words. Sentimentalism was a blend of idealism and cheerful optimism on the one hand and of a pragmatic and empirical approach on the other hand, but it only too often provided an escapist and passive means of evading problems with which society was confronted.

The existence of a vocabulary peculiar to sentimental literature and its dynamic development shows evidence of a movement which was not limited to the area of imaginative literature only, but pervaded all spheres of eighteenth century society. The following pages will deal with the key words which both fiction and non-fiction then used. They are 'sentiment', 'sentimental', and 'sensitivity'. Also important are 'sense', 'sentimentality', 'sentimentalism', 'sensible', and 'sensitive'. All these words sprang from two Latin words: the verb 'sentire' – 'to perceive by the senses, feel, think, be of opinion' – and its past participle 'sensus'. The

ambiguity of the sentimental movement and of some of its literature (Sterne is particularly illustrative of this point) is manifested in the meaning of the above words in different authors during the century. The very character of the two Latin words gives enough scope for a number of interpretations: the words can refer either to simple physical awareness, or simple mental awareness, or to an awareness in which both elements are present in various ratios. As Brissenden puts it:

They can refer either to feeling (in the emotional rather than the sensory meaning of the word), or to thinking or to states of consciousness in which both partake. They can refer to the process or power of thinking and feeling, and also to its results – to activities and also to states.¹

One can ask what the difference between thinking and feeling is. This same question in various modifications (reason and feeling, the head and the heart, the spirit and the flesh) was one of the central issues of speculation and controversy throughout the century. The gradual shift of emphasis towards the emotional element in philosophical and moral thought is also discernible in the semantics of the central terms of the sentimental vocabulary. It was characteristic of the vocabulary of the period in question that it adopted new senses for words already existing, while the number of completely new words remained small. There is only one word of the terms used by the sentimental movement that owes its existence to the eighteenth century – the adjective 'sentimental' and some of its derivatives.

I will attempt to examine the word that gave its name to the whole tradition from its first appearance in the English language along its path of popularity, which reached its peak with the publication of *A Sentimental Journey*, as well through its decline towards the end of the eighteenth century, when the derivative use began to prevail. The definition given by the O. E. D. says:

Of persons, their dispositions and actions:
Characterized by sentiment. Originally in favourable sense: Characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling. In later use: Addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion; apt to be swayed by sentiment.

The first evidence of its use according to the O. E. D. is from the year 1749, when it appeared in a letter by Lady Bradshaig to Samuel Richardson:

Pray, sir, give me leave to ask you (I forgot it before) what, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word *sentimental*, so much in vogue amongst the polite, both in town and country? In letters and common conversation. I have asked several who make use of it, and have generally received for an answer, it is – it is – *sentimental*. Everything clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word; but [I] am convinced a wrong interpretation is given, because it is impossible everything clever and agreeable can be so common as this word. I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a *sentimental* man; we were a *sentimental* party; I have been taking a *sentimental* walk. And that I might be reckoned a little in the fashion, and, as I thought, show them the proper use of the word, about six weeks ago, I declared I had just received a *sentimental* letter. Having

¹ Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment From Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974.), p. 15.

often laughed at the word and found fault with the application of it. I was loudly congratulated upon the occasion, but I should be glad to know your interpretation of it.²

Richardson's reply is not preserved, but we can construe his interpretation from the 'Postscript' to *Clarissa*, which came out in 1748, a year before the date of the first appearance given by the O. E. D. Richardson wrote:

But the reader must have observed, that, great, and, it is hoped, good use, has been made throughout the work, by drawing Lovelace an infidel, only in *practice*; and this as well in the arguments of his friend Belford, as in his own frequent remorse, when touched with temporary compunction, and in his last scenes; which could not have been made, had either of them been painted as *sentimental* unbelievers.³

Although Lovelace is an infidel in practice, he is by no means an infidel 'in his opinion', 'by his judgement'. 'Sentimental' here means as Erämetsä suggests 'of opinion', 'of thought'. This meaning is not contained in the O. E. D., though. In spite of the fact that 'sentimental' is not recorded in the most authoritative dictionary of the period, in Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), the entry under 'sentiment', whose derivative 'sentimental' doubtless is, gives a clear idea of the use in the 1740's and 1750's. Johnson's definition of 'sentiment' is 'thought, notion, opinion', which is what Richardson must have had in mind when speaking about Lovelace. The word 'sentiment' still has this meaning when we say: 'These are my sentiments on that matter'. This neutral meaning began to assume the moral colouring as a result of the growing stress on moral questions. The modified meaning of 'morally virtuous', 'sententious' can be found a few years later again in Richardson. When Charlotte Grandison and Lucy Selby write a joint letter describing the wedding of Sir Charles and Harriet, Charlotte finds herself making moral reflections and stops suddenly:

But here comes Lucy. My dear girl, take the pen, I am too *sentimental*. The French are only proud of their sentiments at this day; the English cannot bear them. Story, story, story is what they hunt after, whether sense or nonsense, probable or improbable.⁴

It might have been this passage that inspired Dr. Johnson to remark:

Why, Sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your patience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment.⁵

Between 1760 and 1768 (the year *A Sentimental Journey* was published) the word was undergoing further change in the direction of feeling, emotion. In the 1750's the emotional part of the Reason-Feeling complex

² Quoted in Edith Birkhead, 'Sentiment and Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Novel', *Essays and Studies*, 11 (1925), p. 93.

³ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa Harlowe* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902), IX, p. 322.

⁴ Erämetsä's terms used in *A Study of the Word 'Sentimental' and of Linguistic Characteristics of Eighteenth Century Sentimentalism in England* (Helsinki, 1951).

⁵ Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902), VI, p. 324.

⁶ James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, quoted in Birkhead, p. 94.

was gaining more importance over the intellectual part. This tendency found its reflection in the changing connotations of 'sentimental'. There is enough evidence in contemporary fiction and non-fiction for establishing new meanings of the 'sentimental'-group words. They are 'of moral reflection' or 'of moral feeling'.⁷ However, none of these meanings can be traced in the eighteenth century dictionaries. Erämetsä accounts for the non-existence of the modified meaning definitions by either the lexicographers' natural reluctance to recognize new shades of meanings, or by their copying each other's definitions, or by the slightness of the shift of meaning. Examples in the O. E. D. from the 1760's illustrate how new connotations had been added since the word 'sentimental' first appeared in 1748. The first example from 1762 shows that the change of meaning was still in process at the time. In *Elements of Criticism* Lord Kames wrote:

It is beyond the power of music to raise a passion or a sentiment: but it is in the power of music to raise emotions similar to what are raised by sentiments expressed by words pronounced with propriety and grace: and such music may justly be turned *sentimental*.⁸

Later on in the book he puts it quite clearly what he means by 'sentiment': 'Every thought prompted by passion is termed a sentiment'.⁹ The other two examples signal a further move in the direction of pure feeling, so wide-spread from the end of the 1760's on. Frances Brooke in *A History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763) describes the squires in France: 'Your squires are an agreeable race of people, refined, sentimental, formed for the *belle passion*'.¹⁰ The term probably stands here for 'capable of refined feeling', 'elevated', just like in the next example from Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality* (1765-1770): 'When we hear the delicious enchantment of music, it is but an internal sketch, and faint echo of those sentimental and rapturous tunings that rise up, throughout the immensity of our God, from eternity to eternity'.¹¹ Erämetsä characterizes the changed meaning of 'sentimental' as follows: 'So the meaning of "sentimental" ... became naturally emotionalized. The word of definition remained the same, but the source of virtue and moral conduct was being transferred from the Head to the Heart'.¹²

By the end of the 1750's, largely due to the immense success of *A Sentimental Journey*, the words 'sentiment' and 'sentimental' and what they stood for or what the readers thought them to stand for were enjoying extreme popularity. However, there were traditionalists who refused to accept the new vogue and criticized it, like *The Monthly Review*, which summed up the clash between the traditional and popular by these words:

⁷ Erik Erämetsä, pp. 33-34.

⁸ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentimental'.

⁹ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentiment'.

¹⁰ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentimental'.

¹¹ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentimental'.

¹² Erämetsä, p. 37.

The word 'sentimental' is like 'continental' a barbarism that has but lately disgraced our language, and it is not always easy to conceive what is meant by it. We have before seen a 'Sentimental' Novel, and a 'Sentimental' Journey, and now we have Attempts at 'Sentimental' Poetry. Our own old English word 'sentimental' means only thought, notion, opinion: the French word 'sentiment' seems to mean 'intellectual sensation', a sense of conduct and opinion, distinct from the sense of qualities that affect us by the taste, sight, smell, touch, and hearing: it has a place in the cant of our travelled gentry, many of whom show by their use of it, they neither know the meaning of it in English nor French: to the fashionable use of the word 'sentiment', however, we owe the use of the word 'sentimental', which, from polite conversation, has, at length, found its way to the press.¹³

The words in question had acquired a distinctly emotional and sometimes even sexual colouring. They were also beginning to take on the meaning usual today: 'addicted to indulgence in superficial emotions; apt to be swayed by sentiment',¹⁴ 'conveying an imputation of either insincerity or mawkishness'.¹⁵ As we have seen above, the words had none of these later meanings for Richardson. The sentiments in his book were indeed 'moral and instructive' and had nothing to do with refined feelings.

Sterne's first use of 'sentimental' in his writings shows how equivocal the meaning was at his time. He wrote in 1760 in Book I of *Tristram Shandy*:

It is not impossible, but that my dear Jenny! tender as the appellation is, may be my child. - Consider, - I was born in the year eighteen. - Nor is there any thing unnatural or extravagant in the supposition, that my dear Jenny may be my friend. - Friend! - My friend. - Surely, Madam, a friendship between the two sexes may not subsist, and be supported without - Fyl Mr. Shandy: - Without any thing, madam, but that tender and delicious sentiment, which ever mixes in friendship, where there is a difference of sex. Let me entreat you to study the pure and sentimental parts of the best French Romances; - it will really, Madam, astonish you to see with what a variety of chaste expression this delicious sentiment, which I have the honour to speak of, is dress'd out.¹⁴

The connotations, which Sterne confuses and sets off against each other in the passage, are of moral, philosophical, emotional, and erotic character. Later in *A Sentimental Journey* he made full use of the equivocal 'tender and delicious sentiment' which is always involved whether we want it or not in friendship, 'where there is a difference of sex'. It was Sterne's ambiguous employment of the word 'sentimental',¹⁵ and above all the sense of humour and the amusement he was getting out of deliberately confusing all the slight shades of meaning with which the term was by that time invested, that made John Wesley remark in his *Journal*:

I casually took a volume of what is called *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. *Sentimental!* what is that? It is not English; he might as well say *Continental*. It is not sense. It conveys no determinate idea; yet one fool makes many. And this nonsensical word (who would believe it?) is becoming a fashionable one. However, the book

¹³ Quoted in Susie I. Tucker, *Protean Shape: A Study in Eighteenth-century Vocabulary and Usage* (London: The Athlone Press, 1967), pp. 248-249.

¹⁴ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentimental'.

¹⁵ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentiment'.

agrees fully with the title, for one is as queer as the other. For oddity, uncouthness and unlikeness to all the world beside, I suppose, the writer is without a rival.¹⁶

The 1770's witnessed a boom of books which proclaimed themselves to be 'sentimental'; the reading public could read such books as: *Sentimental Fables Designed chiefly for the Use of Ladies*, *Sentimental Sailor*, *The Sentimental Exhibitor*; or *Portraits and Sketches of the Time*, *The Sentimental Spy*, *Sentimental Discourses upon Religion and Morality*, *Sentimental and Practical Theology*, *The Sentimental Magazine*, *The Sentimental and Masonic Magazine*, etc., etc. 'Sentimental' books appeared in their dozens also on the Continent, where *A Sentimental Journey* was imitated, and the new catchword was borrowed (France), or translated into the domestic language by a completely new word (in Germany Lessing suggested that Joachim Christoph Bode, the translator of *A Sentimental Journey*, should invent a completely new term for the English 'sentimental'; that is how 'empfindsam-keit' found its origin). However, it is in the 1770's and 80's that we can observe the beginning of the decline of sentimental ideas and that the word begins to take on its derisive meaning current today. The exaltations of feeling, easily transformed into mere passions, at the expense of Reason and morality (pivotal concepts of the Enlightenment) dishonour the word. Vicesimus Knox puts it well when he writes:

The sentimental manner... has given an amiable name to vice, and has obliquely excused the extravagance of the passions, by representing them as the effects of lovely sensibility. The least refined affections of humanity have lost their indelicate nature, in the ideas of many, when dignified by the epithet of sentimental; and transgressions forbidden by the laws of God and man have been absurdly palliated, as proceeding from an excess of those finer feelings, which vanity has arrogated to itself as elegant and amiable distinctions. A softened appellation has given a degree of gracefulness to moral depravity.¹⁷

Towards the end of the century the quantity of literature written in the sentimental vein was rising, but the quality was on the decline. *The Man of Feeling* by Henry Mackenzie, a book at least as popular as Sterne's novels then, but hardly read today, despite a few humorous and ironic passages and its relatively good style and deft composition, is a typical example of how inborn refined sensitiveness, the responses of which were prompted by the least external provocation, was formalized in 'spontaneous' expressions of a sensitive heart and delicate dispositions such as weeping, kneeling, fainting, etc. Only the real men of feeling were gifted with delicate sensibility and responsiveness, but as sensibility became fashionable, regarded as 'good manners', those who did not possess them merely imitated it, even though the innate promptings were not present in their hearts and heads. The philosophical doctrines of 'moral sense' and 'moral sentiments' lost their significance and feelings were no longer cultivated for the sake of morality and 'ennobling' humanity, but for their own sake.

¹⁶ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), Book I., p. 42.

¹⁷ Quoted in Brissenden, p. 106, n. 32.

By the end of the century the meaning of 'sentimental' and its derivatives as we know it today was firmly established,¹⁸ so the definition given unwittingly by W. Roberts in the magazine *Looker-On* in 1793 might be found in any dictionary of our time: 'let such as come under this latter description... not be confounded with... those barren sentimentalists who love to refine upon sorrows without relieving them'.¹⁹ Some forty years later the derisive undertone of Roberts changed into the somewhat more contemptible tone of *A History of the French Revolution* by Thomas Carlyle, who refers to 'that rosepink vapour of Sentimentalism, Philanthropy, and Feasts of Morals'.²⁰

The words under discussion underwent a dynamic and significant shift of meaning just as the sentimental movement proper had its periods of rise in popularity from the beginning of the century to the end of the 1760's, of absolute vogue throughout the society following Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, and of decline and eventual fall from grace as the end of the century was drawing near.

¹⁸ Quoted in Tucker, p. 249.

¹⁹ In France the term 'sensibilite' was given to the simulated and sterile set of attitudes.

²⁰ Quoted in the O. E. D. under 'sentimental'.

