

Failure and Sensibility

The Literature of Sensibility, it would appear, is concerned with the pathos of failure and it operates by a process of justification, consolation and gratification. The justification creates a special sphere of causation to which the victim is susceptible and which dissolves his responsibility; the consolation offers a privileged position to this realm of causation whereby the fallen achieve a moral superiority over the world of success, occupied as it is by the greedy, who in Gray's words:

“...wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.” (Elegy)

The Gratification becomes possible only as these are satisfied, for working with an established moral ground by which the fallen are exonerated of responsibility for their state, appeals can be made for the sympathy and benevolence of both fellow sufferers (who can only offer tears) and those, who though not fallen, know themselves to be among the righteous (these can offer financial relief).

It is my contention that this process pivots on a form of special pleading whereby the disaffected surrender their independence and responsibility in return for the benevolent support of those who have escaped the predicament of failure. Furthermore it is my suspicion that this not only holds for the plots of novels of sensibility but may also explain the vogue among a predominantly middle class readership of a literature specializing in the hardships of the working classes.

If we turn to Machenzie's Men of Feeling, the quintessential novel of sensibility, we can see this process in action. Take the introduction wherein the editor is engaged in a leisurely afternoon of hunting with the local curate when a false point brings on a moment of disappointment (the dog is exonerated of blame of course). The editor ruminates:

“There is no state where one is apter to pause and look round one, than after such a disappointment. It is even so in Life. When we have been hurrying on, impelled by some warm wish or other, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left – we find of a sudden that all our gay hopes are flown; and the only slender consolation that some friend can give us, is to point where they were once to be found. And lo! if we are not of that combustible race, who will rather beat their heads in spite, than wipe their brows with the curate, we look round and say, with the nauseated listlessness of the King of Israel, “All is Vanity and Vexation of spirit”.”

In a miniature form this passage demonstrates the process and its internal mechanism. Failure is acknowledged as a chance error leading to disappointment, but the editor underlines that his response, one of acceptance, is morally preferable to those who would curse and balk against fortune's lot. This process is one of withdrawal and resignation, ending not surprisingly with an alliance with King Solomon and an antipathy to the world of "vanity and vexation of spirit." This occurrence creates an atmosphere of "languid stillness" and "melancholy", and comparisons force their way into our reading between this scene and Gray's burdened poet in a country churchyard.

Into this scene enters the mysterious figure of a passing woman, who as a subject of conversation, introduces the history of Harley, the fragments of which comprise the novel. Disappointment at the opening of Mackenzie's work sets the stage in which the editor and reader are prepared to share the experiences and disposition of the Man of Feeling, a paragon of the benevolent response to a world of failure disappointment and hardship.

Harley, witness to many distresses and himself easily duped by the deceitful, suffers one, life-destroying disappointment, a frustrated, indeed inert, love for Miss Walton. When her engagement to Sir Harry Benson comes to Harley's ears, his disappointment becomes a pastoral poem wherein he moves through the process of sensibility, beginning with a confession of impotence as a justification:

"Another, more happy, the maid
By fortune is destin'd to bless – "

Harley presents himself as powerless in the face of larger forces, thereby claiming a lack of responsibility for a failure clearly stemming from his own inertia. Next he excludes himself from the world of normal human affairs preferring to give himself a saint-like status which grows directly from his failure, his inability to act; he speaks to his kindred-spirits of weakness:

"Ye souls of more delicate kind,
Who feast not on pleasure alone,
Who wear the soft sense of the mind,
To the sons of the world still unknown."

Harley enlists himself among those too sensitive to be active in the world, and whose sensitivity is proof in itself of an emotional sympathy and moral benevolence which ultimately finds its roots in the biological constitution of his nerves and organs; his very nature is good and ill suited to the world. Again responsibility is null and void even on the point of goodness. As G.S. Rousseau and, far more usefully, John Mullan have shown the idea of sympathy came, in the 18th century, to be conceived as an innate, and essential, physiological process, which if existing in excess in an individual spoke at once of a higher intellectual and social status (ergo moral) and a disability in normal affairs. As both Rousseau and Mullan point out the impetus of Sensibility is a self-conscious indulgence in the sensations inherent in this sensitivity, and these sensations combine the luxury of grief, a sense of moral martyrdom, and a delicacy which seeks to withdraw into a refined enclosure of isolated experience. Harley complies with our theory with a desire to vanish into a silent background of melancholy reflection:

“Oh! give me the dubious light
That gleams thro’ the quivering shade;
Oh! give me the horrors of night
By gloom and by silence array’d!”

Again the echoes of Gray ring loud.

Harley has justified his predicament, offered himself abundant moral consolation and by indulging his self-pity begins to build a sense of gratification which ends in the dark desire for self-annihilation:

“I could die if I thought she would weep.”

The little pastoral poem is very telling. It ends in a fantasy of self-abasement which hopes to conquer the heart of the beloved through pity, aroused by the pathetic spectacle of a man enslaved and destroyed by his love, dedication and goodness. Harley’s representation in the poem is left dead and buried with a final plead being whispered “Poor Colin was true.”

This whisper is interesting because it asserts that despite everything, all the pain and suffering, the victim of disappointment remains loyal to the object of his desire; indeed it would seem that the victim has destroyed himself in one last pathetic effort to win by the very standard against which he has failed. This is crucial. Indeed this is precisely how Harley dies, just as he is thrown into the presence of his beloved.

If we look at the sad tale of Old Edwards we note that the same process is at work but this time the failure is financial.

Old Edwards is portrayed as absolutely guiltless on financial grounds: industrious, prompt with rent payments and even pliable to the unreasonable demands of landlords and the law. As various hardships appear through no fault of his or his family's, he struggles on to pay debts and settle obligations, as he reflects:

“I thank God I wronged no man, and the world could never charge me with dishonesty.”

Even in poverty, he is not discredited in the eyes of one “gentleman in the neighbourhood” who gives Edwards the use of land and a route back to profitable, honest labour. Working hard he and his son “began to succeed tolerably, and lived contented on its produce” until another “unlucky accident” strikes them. His son is arrested for a crime which is excusable as a manifestation of compassion and the family is further burdened with financial obligations to free him. Then press-orders appear for the son to be inducted into the service.

Never does the family oppose, or even question, the forces that torment them, and indeed, as with Edward's volunteering for serve in his son's place, the care taken to meet the charges of the law seem to endorse that very standard.

Edwards is absolved of guilt even amid persecution at the hands of the law and he remains a dutiful citizen throughout. In India, the source of his strength and goodness is identified as his natural benevolence, as the Old Indian exclaimed “You are an Englishman, but the Great Spirit has given you an Indian Heart.” Edwards is identified as part of the persecuted breed of earthly saints.

Old Edwards exhibits generosity, industry, loyalty, and obedience to such a degree as to constitute the perfect recipient of charity, and at the Graveyard, where his son lies, he receives the tears of his grandchildren and the sworn support of Harley. It is in the completeness of his defeat and his refusal to question the system or standard in which he has failed that he has, in the end, earned the charity and sympathy of the world.

If we look briefly at a work in many respects far removed from The Man of Feeling, we note a similar process at work. In Sterne's The Sentimental Journey, Yorick finds himself confronted by sixteen beggars as he prepares to leave Calais. He produces

eight sous for distribution and the performance begins whereby the destitute display the grounds for their claim to charity.

“A poor tatter’d soul without a shirt on instantly withdrew his claim, by retiring two steps out of the circles, and making a disqualifying bow on his part.”

The urbane benevolence of such self-effacement is so potent a demonstration of charity that it earns a sous and this exclamation:

“Just Heaven! For what wise reasons hast thou order’d it, that beggary and urbanity, which are at such variance in other countries, should find a way to be at unity in this?”

This beggar has fallen to this lot as if by providence, but he also exhibits the virtues of humanity which have condemned him to failure. When another “poor little dwarfish brisk fellow” offers snuff to his fellow sufferers and Yorick he wins two sous. The Old Soldier “worn out to death in the service” has earned his gift, to which he reasserts his loyalty to the nation with “Vive le Roi!”

But the beggar who overpowers Yorick has been driven so low, though he appears to have known better days, as to be on the brink of death; he offers a countenance so full of self-abnegation and supplication that Yorick cannot restrain his generosity.

In each case the formula is the same with the start of the fallen being explained, their responsibility mitigated, and their morals upheld; with these established they have earned the right to indulge in their misfortune and thereby win the tears and alms of passers-by.

With the reading of sensibility in mind, it is remarkable just how differently one reads the passage, quoted by both R.S. Crane and Janet Todd, on “Moral Weeping” in Man (1755) which concludes:

“What can be more nobly human than to have a tender sentimental feeling of our own and other’s misfortunes? This degree of sensibility every man ought to wish to have for his own sake, as it disposes him to, and renders him more capable of practicing all the virtues that promote his own welfare and happiness.”

The passage can be read as bluntly honest about the purpose of sensibility in practice, although this is undoubtedly an unconscious disclosure. In this sense Sensibility is a powerful concept incorporating a physical explanation both for the failure of certain segments of society to compete successfully and for the humane response to the fallen by

those in a position to help. On both sides of the equation the process is upheld as simultaneously good and natural, and as a form of automatism which divests the afflicted with all responsibility and indeed effaces all of their integrity while augmented the very process in society, which has left them behind. By the concept of charity, mercy and support are earned from the successful who reward those who most deny themselves and most endorse the economic system complete with a respect for law and order, duty and loyalty, and of course the network of morals defining the good nuclear family.

To turn to Goldsmith's Problematic rendition of the story of Job in The Vicar of Wakefield we find the process of sensibility again at work, though here the prevalence of God's providence, as the object of discussion, complicates an otherwise really very blatant economic parable. The Vicar has an absolute that fate is in the hands of providence, and therefore unquestionable; this is clear in the Vicar's Sermon to the Inmates:

“My Friends, my children, and my fellow sufferers, when I reflect on the distribution of good and evil here below, I find that much has been given man to enjoy, yet still more suffer.”

This system by its nature dissolves responsibility for hardship, and it offers rewards and consolation to those who have fallen by the wayside:

“But though religion is very kind to all men, it has promised peculiar rewards to the unhappy; the sick, the naked, the houseless, the heavy-laden, and the prisoner, have ever most frequent promises in our sacred law.”

There is no mistaking the moral superiority of failure in a world of vice

“Yes, my friends, we must be miserable.”

And yes it is death, absolute self-abnegation, which again promises the final reward:

“death becomes the messenger of very glad tidings.”

After the Vicar and his family have survived and surmounted every trial that could possibly beset a humble middle class family, testing all the bonds of loyalty and fidelity, and submission, providence itself rewards with charity so utter a resignation to fate and the powers that be. God appears like a representative of the football pools filling the offers, arranging every desirable marriage and solidifying the most prestigious friendships.

Again the function is the same - self-abnegation earning charity. Not surprisingly the Vicar is easily reconciled to this turn of fortune and he concludes the history of his trials with:

“It now only remained that my gratitude in good fortune should exceed my former submission in adversity.”

The vicar lives on as part of the world success and no doubt from time to time indulge his appetite for sympathy and charity upon some unfortunate but worthy soul.



NECKER HOSPITAL. — Page 432.

From “A Popular History of France from the Earliest Times – Volume 6” F.P.G. Guizot (1787 – 1874)