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The Impossibility of Sympathy

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Abstract

This article questions the status of sympathy in eighteenth century studies. It argues that sympathy can be seen as an economy of two persistent idealizations: the untouchable—that touches everything. Tracing the genealogy of fellow feeling as a militant Puritan concept of exclusion that is still marked by its theological and political past, the sympathy advocated by Hutcheson, Hume and Smith appears as an idealization confronted by its own impossibility. The eighteenth century is a century in search of an absent and insufficient sympathy, a sympathy that is already preoccupied with its own limitations and excesses: a meta-discourse on sympathy still eludes us.

The Impossibility of Sympathy

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I know no book or system of moral philosophy written with sufficient power to melt into our affections.

—Wordsworth¹

I. THE SEARCH FOR SYMPATHY

At the time that Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin were warning of the political dangers of empathy (*Einfühlung*), the North American academy was embracing the eighteenth century as a century of feeling, sensibility, and sympathy.² In *From Classic to Romantic* (1946), Walter Jackson Bate had made the case for the “age of feeling,” and in the 1950s Northrop Frye introduced his influential notion of the “age of sensibility” as a broad description of literature after Pope and before Wordsworth.³ More recently, G. J. Barker-Benfield has characterized the eighteenth century as a period dominated by “the culture of sensibility,” or what he calls a “new psychoperceptual paradigm” which accounted for the volatile relation between consciousness, gender, and consumerism.⁴ For Barker-Benfield, such prominent critics of sensibility as Mary Wollstonecraft were also part of this wider “culture of sensibility.”⁵ This suggests there was an economy of sensibility that included, and was sustained by, critiques of sensibility.⁶ John Mullan, in his 1990 work, *Sentiment and Sociability*, describes this economy of sympathy as an ongoing tension between the limitations of an ideal public sociability and an increasingly fraught private sensibility.⁷ Whether celebrated or charted by its political, economic, and social failings, since at least the 1940s it has been taken for granted in eighteenth-century studies that “sympathy,” the ability to be affected by or to enter into the feelings of others, is the concept *par excellence* of the eighteenth century.⁸

In *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (1996), Jerome McGann accounted for a recent interest in sensibility by noting the decline of the modernist rejection of sensibility and sentiment.⁹ McGann offers a broad out-

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