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“Emotions that reason deepens”: Second Thoughts about Affect

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<1>The title of this essay is drawn from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), the hastily written and quickly published response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in which the parliamentarian’s political arguments are censured for their dependence on a suspect sentimentality (54). Amongst the many well known contributions to the “pamphlet wars” provoked by the *Reflections*, the *Vindication* distinguishes itself by directly interrogating the sentimental grounds of Burke’s position, thereby extending its critical force backward to philosophical currents of the preceding decades, and anticipating the complex challenges to sentimentalism arising in the decades that follow.

<2>My second thoughts about the current turn to affect in criticism are provoked by taking seriously the implications of Wollstonecraft’s paradoxical phrase. What are “emotions that reason deepens”? Are they intensified by reason? Can reason be brought to bear on the emotions without attenuating their force? Wouldn’t it make more sense to speak of *reason* deepened by the emotions rather than emotions enhanced by the faculty we tend to think of as moderating, controlling, and even opposing their force? These questions pertain to the recent turn to affect in literary and cultural studies, an interest driven in part and often supported by the contributions of neurobiology and evolutionary science to the understanding of the emotions. The current ubiquity of affect in criticism, as well as the frequent recourse to scientific insights on affect in humanistic scholarship, compel reflection on Wollstonecraft’s penetrating doubts about what—her own writing helps us see—were related intellectual tendencies in her own time.

<3>Wollstonecraft’s reading of eighteenth century philosophical psychology ranged over the entirety of that vital field of inquiry, from empiricist milestones such as Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), to early materialist systems such as that of Helvetius in *De l’Esprit* (1758), as well as to works expounding the force of the moral emotions such as Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740) and Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).⁽¹⁾ Her thoughtful analysis of the ethical discourses propounding sensibility has

tended to be obscured by the greater attention paid to her strident contempt for sentimental novels, and certainly the charges she levels against Burke's "ostentatious" display of feeling are consistent with her disdain for "sensibility" as the "*manie* of the day" (6). Nevertheless the precision and substance of Wollstonecraft's engagement with arguments for the role and value of the emotions in moral experience merit attention as a contribution to philosophical debates related to, but distinct from a broader diagnosis of cultural fashion. Schooling its readers in the questionable foundations and implications of the philosophical theories underwriting Burke's *Reflections*, the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* does its most devastating and rigorous work in the analysis of moral sentimentalism woven through its political argument.

<4>Wollstonecraft's sharp critique of both the theory and the rhetoric associated with sensibility in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (and the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*) takes special issue with the moral value accorded to sensuous and affective *immediacy*. Rejecting what she terms "quick emotions" as the source of ethically meaningful sympathetic feeling, she argues that we "ought to beware of confounding mechanical instinctive sensations with emotions that reason deepens and justly terms the feeling of *humanity*"—adding that the term "humanity" "discriminates [between] the active exertions of virtue [and] the vague declamation of sensibility" (53, emphasis in the original). Poets, she observes, may "move the heart by a kind of mechanical spring," but she "begs leave to doubt" that "the first intuitive glance of feeling should discriminate the form of truth" (30). Although Wollstonecraft is unsparing of Burke's "impassioned" language, scorning its "turgid bombast" and openly questioning its "sincerity," her attack glances off the rhetoric of the *Reflections*, aiming instead at the heart of the influential eighteenth century arguments for a natural moral sense that are the substantive basis for her opponent's confident appeals to the shared, uncorrupted feelings of all Englishmen. Tracing Burke's "sentimental jargon" back to "books of morals" in current circulation, Wollstonecraft offers this summary of the prevailing hypothesis:

A kind of mysterious instinct is *supposed* to reside in the soul, that instantaneously discerns truth, without the tedious labour of ratiocination. This instinct... has been termed *common sense*, and more frequently *sensibility*; and by a kind of *indefeasible* right, it has been *supposed*... to reign paramount over the other faculties of the mind, and to be an authority from which there is no appeal. (29, original emphases)

<5>This infallibly operative moral sense is both universal and physiological, part of what the eighteenth century terms our "sensitive nature." David Hume, for example, had famously invoked the "force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another in all creatures" as the origin of moral judgments in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (234). Wollstonecraft's critique of such a position involves discomfort with the unreflecting automaticity of sympathy-as-sensation. When "described as instinct," she notes, "good disposition" can serve no "moral purpose" (31) for it leaves us "nothing to do" but act unreflectively, as we "eat and drink" (32). Without discounting the vital role of emotions ("Sacred be the feelings!") (30), and without eschewing affective rhetoric altogether ("My heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies") (32), Wollstonecraft is pointedly skeptical about the *significance* accorded to the materialization of feeling in the body. Evincing the "liveliness" of the sympathetic sensation, Hume had observed that it causes the

“blood [to] flow with a new tide” and the “heart [to be] elevated” (228). But for Wollstonecraft, such valuation of corporeal response discounts the role of insight and reflection in sympathy, rendering it no more than a “blind impulse” (30). Moreover, its elaboration *as* sensation (in philosophical writing fully as much as in sentimental literature) risks complacent self-absorption with the mere fact of bodily feeling as a “response” that effectively responds to nothing or, to be more precise, to no other. “The being who is not spurred on to any virtuous act still...boasts of its feelings,” Wollstonecraft observes, “Why? Because the sight of distress, or an affecting narrative, made its blood flow with more velocity, and the heart, literally speaking, beat with sympathetic emotion” (54). To be moved, then, is not necessarily to be spurred into movement.

<6>It is interesting, but not necessarily surprising given the intellectual genealogy at issue here, to find Wollstonecraft’s reservations about moral sentimentalism echoed in recent critical accounts of the diverse set of interests, approaches and research we group together under the heading “affect.” Historian of science Ruth Leys, for example, writing in *Critical Inquiry*, points out the convergence of cultural theory, psychology, and neuroscience around a view of the affects as “non-cognitive, corporal processes or states” (437). Without denying that “humans and nonhuman animals are emotionally embodied creatures, and that this fact is of the highest importance” (470), Leys raises troubling questions about the mind-body dualism implicit in theories that emphasize the “autonomic” quality of affect as a “response [rooted in the body] which occurs below the threshold of consciousness and cognition” (443). On this view, she argues, “thinking [always] comes ‘too late’ for reasons, beliefs, intentions and meanings to play the role in action and behavior usually attributed to them” (443). At the very least, Leys’s intervention offers a salutary caution against relying too heavily on a historically and conceptually unstable distinction between affect and emotion, for example, and a reminder that any effort to differentiate processes such as memory, reason, will, sensation, and emotion must acknowledge, even as it artificially separates these functions, the complicated interrelation among them.

<7>Expressing similar reservations about the conceptual role affect has come to play in cultural and ethical criticism, Martha Nussbaum has recently defended the position that “emotions are forms of judgment” against the influential view, in cognitive psychology and bio-anthropology, that emotions are “nonreasoning movements” or “unthinking energies” (185-186).⁽²⁾ Neither Nussbaum nor Leys, it bears emphasizing, dispute the significance of current scientific research, but both are interested in situating the conclusions drawn from that research in a wider analytic framework where the intellectual genealogy of mind-body dualism, for example, or of poststructuralist critique of agency can be seen to have a bearing on the questions scientists are asking and the broader reception of their findings. To suggest that underlying and by no means empirically grounded assumptions may shape the design of scientific inquiries bearing on human thought and behavior is to venture no more than any reflective researcher would concede. Frans de Waal, for example, the ethologist who has done pioneering work on animal altruism and the evolutionary origins of empathy, attributed the relative invisibility of behaviors evincing care, consolation, and reconciliation in research on primates to the long *duree* of political theories (from Hobbes to Rawls) privileging autonomy and individualism (166-168).⁽³⁾ De Waal is perhaps exceptional in a moment during which philosophers and literary critics are more disposed to

claim that scientific findings “confirm” humanistic insights (such as Hume’s hypothesis of sympathy, for example, or Jane Austen’s representation of nonverbal communication) than to acknowledge the degree to which science is embedded within and influenced by the cultural milieu.⁽⁴⁾ In such a moment it would be a provocation to propose that philosophy and literature may be seen to offer substantial, alternative approaches to the same objects of scientific investigation, and yet the effort to establish this distinction amongst modes of inquiry is precisely and repeatedly to be found in romantic and post-romantic reflection on aesthetics. Thomas De Quincey’s famous essay on the “Literature of Power and the Literature of Knowledge,” for example, insisted on the distinction between works speaking to the “mere discursive understanding” and works of literature, from which “nothing at all” is learned, but which compel an “exercise and expansion” of (moral) imagination (15). Later in the century, George Eliot, who was so remarkably fluent in the sciences of her time, could not be more clear on the difference: “One might as well hope to dissect one’s own body and be merry in doing it,” she writes, “as take molecular physics... to be your determiner of motives. That every study has its bearing on every other is true; but pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history which make an experience and knowledge over and above the swing of atoms” (Haight 99).

<8>When Wollstonecraft questions the moral value attributed to that “mysterious instinct . . . supposed to reside in the soul” (29), insisting instead on the necessary cultivation of feelings through experience and the “arduous, rugged path” toward the acquisition of virtue (30), her critique of Burke’s reliance on the significance of “inbred sentiments” needs to be understood as dissenting from what was, in effect, the moral “science” of her time. At issue for Wollstonecraft in the notion of an instinctive virtue is the gross simplification of deliberation and effort that, in her terms, degrades human “hope, fear and love” to the passions of mere “brutes” (30). George Eliot makes the same point in virtually the same terms in her 1855 review of the evangelist John Cumming, observing that there is no more “pernicious fallacy afloat in common parlance than the distinction made between intellect and morality. Amiable impulses without intellect man may have in common with dogs and horses; but morality, which is specifically human, is dependent on the... cooperation of the intellect with the impulses” (44). These positions align Wollstonecraft and Eliot with the ethics of Immanuel Kant, whose *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) first draws a *methodological* boundary between a “practical anthropology” concerned with the empirical features of moral psychology and a “pure moral philosophy” which turns out to be, above all, aspirational, driven by an imagination (Kant would say a logic) of moral life (2-3).⁽⁵⁾ On this view, the inclinations associated with sensibility count for very little. “Many souls are so sympathetically attuned” that they readily come to the aid of others, but their actions, “however amiable” have “no true moral worth,” according to Kant, precisely because they derive from merely spontaneous impulses (11).⁽⁶⁾ “Mechanical instinctive sensations” allow for no exercise of what Kant calls “good will” and what Wollstonecraft terms the “active exertions of virtue.” The alternative to blind impulse which Wollstonecraft offers is not pure reason, however, but a compound of “emotions that reason deepens,” so that reason or intellect might be said to “cooperate” with feeling, as Eliot puts it, rather than to overrule, or guide, or displace feeling. Bearing this in mind might in turn open up a reading of Kant that would give appropriate place to the role of emotion in his own argument, especially the moral feeling of “respect” or, quite literally, “attention” [*Achtung*] to others. To imagine a philosophical genealogy in which Kant is affiliated to a nineteenth century tradition

of ethical thinking including Wollstonecraft and Eliot would require a willingness to rethink the hardened opposition between emotion and reason, just as Wollstonecraft invites her readers to do when she distinguishes “*rational affections*” from “untaught feelings” and the “passions [that] bind brutes together” (39). For the purposes of the present essay, however, I am mainly interested in locating Wollstonecraft’s strong reservations about the moral value of quick emotions and forcible sensations within a long history of thinking about the cognitive value of feelings that extends to present day critique of “affect theory” by Leys, Nussbaum, Amelie Rorty, and others.

<9>In drawing attention to this affinity between Kant, Wollstonecraft, and Eliot, I do not mean to overstate the latter writers’ commitment to the kind of rationalism associated with the former but, on the contrary, to take the critique that all three thinkers mount on sensibility as deepening and refining reflection on the role of the emotions for ethical experience, as well as insisting upon the distinctive methodological value of an imaginative or speculative approach to ethics (as opposed to an empirically driven approach, be it anthropological in Kant’s terms, or biological as is common today).

<10>I alluded above to the recurrent nineteenth century effort to stake a claim for philosophy and literature as distinctive modes of inquiry that, in the context of this discussion, attend to emotional and ethical experience in ways that might not, and need not, correlate with scientific accounts. I now want to turn briefly to the work of Jane Austen as an exemplary instance of how fiction complicates the eighteenth century “moral science” of sensibility Wollstonecraft criticizes, and offers an elaboration of that paradoxical possibility of “emotion deepened by reason” which she offers in its stead.

Censure and Sensibility

<11>The title of Austen’s first published novel proposes an opposition that most readers have recognized as being destabilized and reevaluated as the work unfolds. Walter Scott’s straightforward summary of the novel’s plot, in a review essay that announces the exhaustion of extravagantly sentimental style in fiction, offers a reminder of the balanced elements Austen’s novel contains and unsettles:

Sense and Sensibility... contains the history of two sisters. The elder, a young lady of prudence and regulated feelings, becomes gradually attached to a man of an excellent heart and limited talents, who happens unfortunately to be fettered by a rash... engagement. In the younger sister, the influence of sensibility and imagination predominates; and she... also falls in love, but with more unbridled and willful passion. Her lover... proves faithless, and marries a woman of large fortune. The interest and merit of the piece depend altogether upon the behaviour of the elder sister, while obliged at once to sustain her own disappointment with fortitude, and to support her sister, who abandons herself, with unsuppressed feelings, to the indulgence of grief. The marriage of the unworthy rival at length relieves her own lover from his imprudent engagement, while her sister, turned wise by precept, example, and experience, transfers her affection to a very respectable and somewhat too serious admirer. (194)(7)

<12>Scott foregrounds two structural elements that bear emphasis: the *parallelism* between the two sisters who endure the disappointment of attachment to lovers who turn out to be unattainable as

husbands, and the *asymmetry* of the novel's treatment of the two sisters, not only in the wish-fulfilling plot twist that allows the elder to marry her first love, but also in the attention paid to the elder, whose feelings and conduct make up the main "interest" of the work, predominating especially in the later half when, it would seem, the wounded sensibility of the younger sister is almost entirely eclipsed.

<13>With that in mind, let me turn to one early scene from the novel in which the terms "sense" and "sensibility" are mingled and interfused, confounded rather than opposed by the "and" which joins them in Austen's title. During a country excursion with the Middletons, Marianne and Willoughby speed ahead and separate themselves from the larger party. They are later found to have spent their time alone touring, uninvited, the house and grounds belonging to Mrs. Smith—the aunt whose property Willoughby expects to inherit and with whom, as Elinor notes, "Marianne had not the slightest acquaintance" (52). The unwarranted visit shocks Elinor, who "could hardly believe" it to be true—a reaction that shocks Marianne in turn, who becomes "quite angry with her for doubting" both the fact and the suitability of the detour. A contentious dialogue between the sisters ensues:

"I never spent a pleasanter morning in my life."

"I am afraid," replied Elinor, "that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety."

"On the contrary, nothing can be stronger proof of it, Elinor; for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such conviction I could have had no pleasure."

"But, my dear Marianne, as it has already exposed you to some very impertinent remarks, do you not now begin to doubt the discretion of your own conduct?" (52)

To Elinor's final question begging her sister's consideration of the consequences of her behavior, Marianne replies with quick wit and a deceptively simple statement of principle: "If the impertinent remarks of Mrs. Jennings are to be the proof of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of our lives. I value not her censure any more than I should do her commendation. I am not *sensible* of having done anything wrong'" (52, my emphasis).

<14>On the grounds of logic and consistency, Marianne clearly has the better of this exchange. Elinor's qualified and euphemistic framing of what constitutes good judgment is clarified and opposed by her sister's clear discriminations and rephrasing. Rather than denying the impropriety of her conduct, Marianne exposes the stakes of the vague charge. "*Real* impropriety" cautions against confusing occasions that pertain to the discrimination of right from wrong with mere breaches of decorum that, in the lexicon of the period, would also be named "improper." Elinor's somewhat hedged assertion that pleasure is not always proof of good conduct meets the rebuttal of unqualified principle: we *always* know right from wrong, on Marianne's reasoning, and never feel pleasure in doing the latter, therefore "I should have been sensible," indeed could not *but* be sensible (in the sense of both awareness and feeling), of being wrong on this occasion. Taking a different tack, Elinor questions Marianne's "discretion," but that is no more accurate a term for what is really meant than impropriety. Moreover, shifting the grounds of her reasoning from demurral about the correspondence of "pleasure" and good conduct to a new objection that implicitly makes the approbation of others a

standard of judgment only clears a path for the straightforward assertion of the autonomy of judgment Marianne offers in rebuttal: neither the censure nor the commendation of others *should* have a bearing on the determination of right conduct.

<15>“I am not *sensible* of having done anything wrong”: Marianne’s repetition compounds her prior claim that one always knows and/or feels when one is acting wrongly with a principle of moral self-determination. If one were to seek support for her position in this dialogue one could do no better than look to the philosopher who declared “the motto of the enlightenment is: have the courage to think for yourself.” Indeed what Marianne means by being “sensible” in this case, and what Austen means by using the word in this context, are fully in accord with Kant’s elaboration of the autonomy of judgment in *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*—an association I won’t belabor here, but do think is an important piece of the psychologically reflective and intellectually complex amplification of “emotions that reason deepens” among a range of nineteenth century women writers. (8)

<16>It may be argued that Marianne’s position is still characteristic of her position as the sister with *no* (common) sense because its uncompromising idealism cannot be lived out in a social world where Elinor’s equivocal idiom, mingling the expectations of manners and convention with prudential considerations, is a more ordinary language of ethical judgment than the more philosophical one substituted for it by Marianne. The accommodating malleability of language, its capacity, both generative and dangerous, to shape perception by interpretation has been at issue from the very beginning of the novel when, in the bravura second chapter, the Dashwoods’ elder half-brother John and his wife subject his “promis[e] to do everything in his power to make [his father’s widow and her daughters] comfortable” (7) to successive rewordings that erode the sense of that promise. By the time they are done conversing on the matter, doing “everything in his power” comes to mean that “it would be absolutely unnecessary... to do more” than help his “half blood” relations (“no relationship at all” in Mrs. Dashwood’s terms) move out of Norland, “sending them presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they are in season” (9-13). Certainly this early dialogue, which results in the sisters’ displacement from their home and thereby sets the plot in motion, has disturbing implications for the stability of distinctions, between good and bad, say, or right and wrong, around which the moral feelings—guilt, shame, injury, pity, regret—begin to cluster for the reader and, in uneven ways, for the characters.

<17>Marianne’s simple “we always know” when we are wrong might be a naïve avoidance of both the linguistic and psychic complexity of moral discernment that Austen alerts us to, but the spontaneity of judgment and expression Marianne affirms remains a unique and uniquely un-ironized value in the novel, one which Austen seems to associate with an honesty toward self and others that not even Elinor shares. Indeed, on discovering that Edward Ferrars has been concealing his long-standing engagement to Lucy Steele while actively paying her the attentions of a suitor, Elinor reevaluates his “ill-treatment of herself” on a pattern entirely consistent with the corrosive rhetorical reshaping practiced by John Dashwood and his wife (99). Her initial recognition that Edward’s “ill-treatment” is a “fact which no partiality could set aside” does not survive the interpretive partiality which first softens the fact into merely “blameable” and “imprudent” conduct, and then transforms it into evidence for an entirely contrary view that he “had done nothing to forfeit her esteem” (99-100). By the time the secret

engagement comes to be known, Elinor can *only* admit the possibility that the factual “particulars” of Edward’s behavior make him a “second Willoughby” by imagining the insight as the damaging and mistaken interpretation likely to be made by her recently betrayed sister (184).

<18>Marianne herself remains too sensible, let us say, to disregard the analogous dishonesty practiced by both Edward and Willoughby. And indeed, so does the narrator. Consider the delicate ambiguity of pronouns that cannot quite do the work of containing, by projecting onto Marianne, the painful understanding Elinor disowns:

She was going to remove what she really believed to be her sister’s chief consolation,—to give such particulars of Edward, as she feared would ruin him forever in her good opinion,—and to make Marianne, by a resemblance in their situations, which to *her* fancy would seem strong, feel all her own disappointment over again. (184, original emphasis)

Whose “good opinion” of Edward is at risk here? And whose disappointment is liable to be revived? Even the italicized “*her*” that emphatically attributes “fancy” to Marianne and, in the same stroke, designates as merely fanciful the apparent resemblance between their cases, cannot entirely fulfill its task. After all, the italics also draw attention to the exertion of thought that simultaneously affirms and negates insight. The resemblance Elinor insists belongs only to “*her*fancy” is, within the free indirect discourse, necessarily also her own understanding—though it can only be permitted articulation *as* the misinterpretation of another. If Elinor ultimately succeeds in bringing Marianne to see “true merit” in Edward’s conduct and “forg[i]ve all his offenses” (190), it is not by asserting a difference between their cases that actually amounts to no meaningful distinction, but by eliciting her sister’s compassion for the “constant and painful exertion” of not “openly shewing that I was *very* unhappy” (186, original emphasis). Surely Marianne’s “sensibility” deserves some credit for the compassionate solicitude with which she acquiesces to her sister’s demands for restraint and reticence.

<19>Even though the latter half of the novel attends ever more exclusively to Elinor’s thoughts, desires and actions, it is not quite done with the fact of Edward’s earlier ill-treatment, not quite done reminding us that the difference between the conduct of the two male lovers in this novel is itself the product of a wishful, or let us say fanciful, effort to esteem where one might blame. In playful banter between the now engaged couple, Austen returns to this very topic. “Your behavior was certainly very wrong,” Elinor gently scolds, “because, to say nothing of my own conviction, our relations were all led away by it to fancy and expect *what*, as you were *thensituated*, could never be” (260, original emphases), a plain statement of the case that easily applies equally to Willoughby, who, by his own account, was certainly wrong in “trying to engage [Marianne’s] regard” when an attachment “was not a thing to be thought of” (227). Edward’s weak defense of his misleading behavior answers the charge as unsuccessfully as Willoughby’s vindicating apology. “I was simple enough to think... there could be no danger in my being with you” (260) Edward maintains, just as Willoughby insists that “I did not know the extent of the injury I meditated” (227) by indulging his pleasure in Marianne’s company. Edward’s “I did not know how far I was got” (260) recalls Willoughby’s admission that he found himself “by insensible degrees sincerely fond of her” (227). Conceding that it “*was*wrong” to prolong his involvement with Elinor

given his growing attachment, Edward's explanations trail off with the repeated assertion of his conviction that "the danger is my own; I am doing no injury to anybody but myself" (260, original emphasis). Uncharacteristically wordless, Elinor simply "smiled and shook her head" (260), a response that offers us no more than an affirmation of the partiality—the love—that has excused Edward from the start. The "unaccountable" turn of events that releases Edward from his engagement "without any reproach to himself" and leaves him "free" to effectively undo harm done involves no small measure of what Bernard Williams terms "moral luck" (20-21).

<20>To note the deliberate parallels between the language used by Edward and Willoughby to explain their misleading comportment with the Dashwood sisters is not to ignore the incommensurability of the two characters disclosed by Austen's plot. There is indeed no resemblance between Willoughby's libertine past and mercenary motives in marriage and Edward's impetuous engagement during a lonely and idle period of his youth. Nevertheless, and perhaps all the more strikingly because Willoughby and Edward are such different men, the novel reminds its readers of a resemblance best grasped when conduct is represented in austere, unqualified terms. When, late in the novel, Elinor reminds her sister that "Our situations have borne little resemblance," Marianne cannot really be gainsaid when she insists that "They have borne more [resemblance] than our conduct" (244). If what counts as the ethically significant "situation" in the novel is the injurious and misleading cultivation of intimacy where no prolonged attachment is intended, then it makes no relevant difference if the damage is done by a confirmed cad or an otherwise honorable naïf. From this perspective, Marianne displays a more consistent "sense" of the ethical—and emotional—truth of the sisters' experience than does her sister.

<21>Certainly Elinor's revisionary judgments are not exactly what Wollstonecraft means by "emotions that reason deepens." The intellectual caution that leads Elinor to mull things over, to review and to refrain from premature certainties is shown, repeatedly and explicitly, and in a tender ironization of character that contributes to the instability of the novel's titular opposition, to be deeply inflected with the unexamined emotional partialities associated with "sensibility." It remains something of a mystery, however, that Marianne's initially unrepressed sensibility does not undergo an analogous reconsideration in Austen's handling. And by "sensibility" here, I do not mean the superficial, culturally scripted displays of taste and feeling that Austen satirizes, but the profoundly assertive alignment of feeling, judgment, autonomy, and spontaneity which she gives this character to articulate and enact. Little in the novel mitigates against Marianne's position—it remains something of an ideal the absence and negation of which is emphatically, albeit ambiguously, foregrounded in the concluding pages of the novel. I would suggest that part of the novel's work in confounding the opposition between the terms sense and sensibility in the title involves keeping open the question about the emotive power and moral insight associated with the latter.

<22>Following the life-endangering fever she contracts by indulging in the "free and luxurious solitude" of long walks on the grounds of the Palmers' estate at Cleveland, Marianne awakens in a mood of abasement and renunciation of both desire and despair, but the novel as a whole invites us to count this as a loss of self even as it recounts the gains accruing to all from this alteration of character. The concluding chapters represent a steady erosion of Marianne's agency, both in repeated repentant reflections and self-abnegating resolutions. "I have laid down my plan," she confides to Elinor.

My feelings shall be governed and my temper improved... I shall now live solely for my family... and if I do mix in other society it will only be to show that my spirit is humbled, my heart amended, and that I can practice the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness and forbearance. (245-246)

These self-disciplinary intentions might seem no more than a change in the key of Marianne's enthusiasm, not a deadening of her sensibility but a mere transference of its intensity. The novel offers this interpretive possibility in the form of Elinor's affectionately condescending reaction, "smiling to see the same eager fancy... now at work in introducing excess into a scheme of... rational employment and virtuous self-control" (243). Even as Elinor's perspective dominates the final chapters of the novel, and although her summary judgment of events is no longer challenged or qualified by sister or mother, a reader might be forgiven for not feeling quite "satisfied," as Elinor does, "that each felt their own error" (249). Marianne's chastened mood registers no more and no less than her sense of being "justified only by the life she hoped for" in confiding her affections so freely and relying on her own sense of the right and wrong occasions for that confidence. To find such hopes "not just negated, but refuted, by what happened" is, perhaps, to experience the kind of regret that may indeed shape later desires and judgments (Williams 27). Nevertheless, insofar as the sisters' fates are divided by an entirely fortuitous turn of events, the emotional spontaneity and independence of judgment Marianne has practiced can hardly be understood as intrinsically flawed.

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<23>The novel's surrender of Marianne's sensibility needs to be read not only *in* her emphatically self-negating pronouncements, and not only *with* Elinor's mollifying appraisal of them as "eager fancy" in a different guise. "The future must be my proof," says Marianne of her resolution to be "checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment" (245-246) and, if so, the novel offers its evidence by means of the notoriously passive constructions through which Marianne's fate is decided and recounted in the final pages. "By general consent" of mother, sister and brother-in-law, "she was to be the reward of all" for Brandon's sorrows and their obligations to his generosity (267). "With such a confederacy," the narrator asks, "what could she do?"—a question that subordinates and renders parenthetical her "knowledge of [Brandon's] goodness" and "conviction of his fond attachment" to an evidently inevitable submission to the general will. Marianne's "extraordinary fate," as the narrator wryly terms it, refers not only to her failure to "fal[l] a sacrifice to irresistible passion" (268), and not only to Austen's refusal to write the kind of sentimental romance Wollstonecraft condemned in 1790 and Scott deemed exhausted in 1815. The passive form of the future foretold, in which "she found herself... submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home" (268), could not more forcefully foreclose the possibility of autonomous judgment which the novel had given this character to articulate. It is then left to us to have second thoughts about the fate of unrepressed affect, emotional insight and the possibilities of self-determination—especially in the wake of its first trials, its first encounters with a world in which words and things and persons are not necessarily what they seem upon first impression.

Endnotes

- (1) On Wollstonecraft's familiarity with Enlightenment philosophy, see especially Frances Ferguson, "Wollstonecraft Our Contemporary" in *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, Linda Kauffman (ed) (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 51-62 and Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 43-76. [\(△\)](#)
- (2) In *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions* see also Amelie Rorty, "Enough Already with the Emotions," 269-278. [\(△\)](#)
- (3) Supplementing and defending his own observations and findings of primate empathy, de Waal draws on alternative lines of philosophical and psychological theory giving primacy to relationality. [\(△\)](#)
- (4) On Hume and contemporary psychological research, see Stephen Darwell, "Empathy, Sympathy, Care." On Austen and the "mind reading" capacities of the brain, see Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts*. For a forceful argument on the necessity of integrating cognitive psychology, brain science and literary criticism see, for example, Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. [\(△\)](#)
- (5) Concerned with "what *ought to happen*, even if it never does," this precarious mode of thinking proceeds "even though there is nothing on heaven or earth from which it depends or on which it is based" (Kant 35-36). [\(△\)](#)
- (6) Although he finds theories of the "supposed special sense" called "moral feeling" commendable for "ascribing to [virtue] *immediately* the delight and esteem we have for her," he insists, as Wollstonecraft does, on the necessary role of reason and reflection (49, original emphasis). Moral philosophy must then become more than a "herald of laws that an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature whispers to it" (35). [\(△\)](#)
- (7) Though published anonymously, the review has long been attributed to Scott. John Murray, publisher of the *Quarterly* (and of *Emma*), provided it to Lockhart as the latter was compiling material for his biography of Scott. [\(△\)](#)
- (8) The intersections between Austen's fiction and eighteenth century philosophical writing on ethics have been the subject of a generative line of recent scholarship on Austen. See for example Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), Eva M. Daldez, *Mirrors to One Another: Emotion and Value in Jane Austen and David Hume* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Deborah Weiss, "Sense and Sensibility: Uncertain Knowledge and the Ethics of Everyday Life," *Studies in Romanticism* 52 (Summer 2013) 253-273, Eric Lindstrom, "Sense and Sensibility and Suffering, or Wittgenstein's Marianne," *ELH* 80:4 (2013) 1067-1091. [\(△\)](#)

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