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A NOTE ON SENTIMENTALITY

"SENTIMENTALITY" HAS BECOME ONE OF THOSE TERMS that do not rationally denominate, but, instead, rhetorically slap. From about the beginning of the nineteenth century it has been mainly confined to pejorative use, generally coupled with such adjectives as "sloppy". Critics often use it as a stick with which to whack offending authors—for example, Dickens and his interminable death of Little Nell—but if they attempt to probe the question of sentimentality further they too infrequently do so in print. It is a real pity.

Somewhere, Paul Valéry lets drop one of those allusive remarks that seem expressly made for expansion: "Tout sentiment est le *solde* d'un compte dont le detail est perdu." This could easily be passed over in silence, as a blatant generalization. It should not be, though. It should be very closely examined. From similar statements in other places it is almost certain that Valéry is talking about "feeling" rather than either "sensation" or "sentiment". But if we slightly mistranslate "sentiment", the statement can be a useful signpost to a possible way of treating the whole general problem of sentiment—and sentimentality.

The first thing to notice in the metaphorical definition is the term "*solde*", which is italicized in the original text. Sentiment is a balance, in the commercial sense of the word—that is, it is something left over, the end product of a series of previous additions and subtractions. It is also an abstract thing. As "un solde" it is the emotional equivalent of a statistical number in an actuarial mortality rate. Like the actuarial number, sentiment can apply only as an average of some sort; it is not precise as regards the individual object. Moreover, it is essentially quantitative. None of these attributes is, in itself, either good or bad, and they are not intended here in a disparaging or even in a critical sense. The abstract, the truly quantitative—the abstracted average is always arrived at by counting — is, under normal conditions, tempered, one might say humanized, by memory. When the individual steps are recalled the numbers are not vaporized, inflated, and turned

into a sentimentalized vision of Number. We might further give precision to a terminology and call this condition—a balance plus memory—"sentiment". But when the details of the account are lost we suddenly find ourselves given over to sentimentality.

Sentimentality, a balance of emotions without the substantiating factor of memory, is thus something cut loose from precision; it displays all the fluttery misconceptions of absent-mindedness. Sentimentality is, to put it simply, emotional absent-mindedness. Historically this seems much to the point. Mr. T. S. Eliot has forcefully brought to our attention the "dissociation of sensibility" that appeared in English literature early in the seventeenth century. This dissociation may be connected with the advent of sentimentality as a way of life and a method of art. The separation of thought and feeling is, in a very strict sense, emotional absent-mindedness. Cut loose from the intellect, the emotions rapidly came to be considered, to be employed, to be submitted to, in isolation from other human aspects. They were less and less considered in relation to sense impressions, and more and more revered as the cause of sentimental expression. The man of feeling replaced man; the part was taken for the whole. Disproportion and unbalance were inevitable.

Possibly this disproportion is observed more easily in that special case of sentimentality known as pornography. Sentimentality may be, and often is, mistakenly considered an emotion rather than an ill-remembered sum of emotions. Pornography, however, is clearly seen to be an unbalanced reference to an aspect of man, the sexual, which in itself is neither good nor bad but merely a fact. It is because of the emotional disproportion aroused in the reader that I choose to consider pornography an extreme case of sentimentality, unlikely as this might at first appear. In the case of the sexual act and its concomitant circumstances, two factors must be considered: the sexual emotions are comparatively easily aroused, and once aroused they are disproportionately strong. Because of this, and the long established and extremely strict taboos surrounding the whole matter in Western culture, a simple description, or even a single word, can cause the pornographic response—the imprecise, generalized, unbalanced emotional reaction from which the concrete details of the emotional reality have been lost.

An interesting situation—remarked on by Geoffrey Gorer in an article in *Horizon* some years ago—which may throw light on this point, existed in Victorian England. An era in which there was considerable indulgence in mawkish sentimentality regarding children, women, animals, and the poor, and one in which

sexual matters were so rigorously tabooed as to be practically ignored in all polite or even semi-polite conversation and writing, "witnessed the publication of a very great deal of pornography, probably a larger quantity for the period than any other country has witnessed". On the surface of Victorian society the emotions of sympathy and pity could be freely and excessively indulged in for their own sake, a condition which was apparently paralleled by a secret but equally excessive indulgence of the repressed sexual emotions. Our present age seems well on its way to reversing this pattern so that the sexual pranks of an Amber, or even a little Lolita, are bandied about in the drawing room while a sneaking desire to drop a tear for Little Nell is something no gentleman would dream of speaking about in front of a lady.

The central characteristic of all forms of sentimentality, including the pornographic and the sadistic—the latter brought to a peak of maudlin stupidity in comic books undreamt of by that old sentimentalist, de Sade—, appears to be the indulgence of a particular emotional state aroused by unreal and essentially dream-like means. A naked body may, under various circumstances, be various things—it may even be obscene—but it can never be pornographic; too many factors of reality are present to allow the complete, exclusive indulgence of a single emotion, even so strong a one as the sexual. Seen as such an emotional indulgence, sentimentality appears in its narcissistic, self-centering, subjective role, for the emotion given free rein is not in the perceived object but solely in the perceiving subject. The hankering after the sentimental or the pornographic in literature or art is really only mental abuse. It is the childlike dream of indulgence, oneness, peace, security, the womb, as over against the real, the mature apprehension which admits the existence of an objective universe and of other subjects than the self, and acts accordingly. It is the emotional equivalent of over-indulgence in ice-cream, or toffee, or whatever the particular "goody" of childhood may have been.

Here is where we must stop for a moment to point out that generalizations about the Victorians should not be allowed to harden into clichés. Sentimentality was being rigorously castigated by critics as early as mid-century. Richard Stang, in his recent *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850-1870*, refers to a number of attacks on Dickens' predilection for verbal wallowing in his death-bed scenes. The terms used by the critics give us another interesting analogy for this kind of emotional indulgence by explicitly linking it to the fifth of the seven deadly sins, *gula*. The death of Paul Dombey gives "the most painful impression of pathos feasting on itself." The same critic says that the death of Little Nell "almost gives

us the sensation of absolute gluttony to enter into the appetizing spirit with which [Dickens] spoons and stirs the subject of grief and death."

Even seen in terms of this kind of indulgence, sentimentality has a narcissistic and introverted quality. A midnight raid on the refrigerator has a kind of unshared perversity about it. There was some sensing of this by F. Scott Fitzgerald when, in *The Great Gatsby*, he presented Tom and Daisy Buchanan, after Daisy's accidental killing of Tom's mistress, "sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table, with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale." There is a horror in this scene that is partly the result—even though Fitzgerald says that "neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale"—of bringing death and gustatory lip-smacking together, just as sentimentality in a curious way seems to do the same. It is ultimately, we see, a matter of taste.

Fitzgerald can enter this argument appropriately because frequent criticism of him amounts to an accusation of sentimentality, though of a different type from that of Dickens. Fitzgerald is often thought to be little more than an indulger in nostalgia, which is, in a sense, and if we can bear the paradox, absent-minded or memory-less fondling of memories. The point is, however, that Fitzgerald was coming to grips with nostalgia, in terms of what he called "the dream", in his three major novels. In each the hero is presented in a special and precise relation to dream and the past: *Gatsby* is trapped by his narcissistic dream of Daisy; Dick Diver, a psychoanalyst, is professionally involved with the dreams and fantasies and pasts of his patients, particularly after he marries one; and Monroe Stahr, the Hollywood producer, is the almost mythical impresario of "dreams that money can buy". Each, in his own way, is related to sentimentality: *Gatsby* is blind to it; Dick Diver is aware of its depths, as his name suggests, but drowns in it; Stahr manipulates it, yet falls. Each is destroyed by nostalgia.

The narcissistic core of the nostalgic sentimentalist is specifically emphasized. Near the end of *Tender is the Night*, when the hero's wife, as it is explicitly stated, "cut the cord forever" between herself and her husband, we are given a passage of his "self-knowledge": "He would have to go fix this thing that he didn't care a damn about, because it had early become a habit to be loved, perhaps from the moment when he had realized that he was the last hope of a decaying clan. On an almost parallel occasion, back in Dohmler's clinic on the Zurichsee, realizing this power, he had made his choice, chosen Ophelia, chosen the sweet poison and drunk it. Wanting above all to be brave and kind, he had wanted, even more than that, to be loved." A page later she speaks to him "as if to a character in her dream". In

The Great Gatsby, the narrator says that "The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." Later, when Gatsby "cried incredulously": "Can't repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can!", and then nostalgically reminisced about his war-time romance with Daisy, the narrator commented "Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something. . . ." Whether or not he controlled sentimentality, Fitzgerald can scarcely be considered unaware of it.

In his study *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Richard Chase points out that "character itself [in the romance] becomes . . . somewhat abstract and ideal." This is in contrast to the novel, which "renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail." We have already seen that the loss of detail plays a part in sentimentality. Surely, also, nostalgia for pastoral innocence or a fantasy past, for the distant and exotic, is a large element in the romance. Now Fitzgerald clearly sees his novels as romances in this sense, as witness such incidental passages as "ahead lay the scalloped ocean and the abounding blessed isles", "High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl . . .", "he had committed himself to the following of a prail", and "he must press on toward the Isles of Greece, the cloudy waters of unfamiliar ports, the lost girl on shore, the moon of popular songs".

I would suggest that in the romance, the predominant tone, and probably ultimately the main theme, is nostalgia — and the great danger for the form is sentimentality. This is, of course, a major difference between the romance and the epic or the tragedy.

Leaving Fitzgerald and turning, for a moment, to that other pole of sentimentality, pornography, we come face to face with another exemplary novelist. Norman Mailer seems to be a writer who is seriously struggling—however successfully—to transmute pornography, or at least the pornographic situation, into art, somewhat in the way that Fitzgerald tried to handle nostalgia. Take the title of Mailer's recent book, *Advertisements for Myself*, and consider it in the light of this sentence from the section in the book entitled "A Note on Comparative Pornography": "Talk of pornography ought to begin at the modern root: *advertising*." This is, of course, merely suggestive but his last novel, *The Deer Park*, with its persistent concern with what could be called the "gymkhana" of sex (to quote Mailer's own term for sexual activity), furnishes more evidence. Mailer himself has said, concerning that novel, "it is totally about sex." This is more and more evidently true of his work as a whole.

The long work he is at present engaged on, of which some excerpts are in-

cluded in *Advertisements for Myself*, shows the same concern. In the prologue, the anonymous, ambiguous, perhaps eponymous narrator tells us something of what appears to be the central part of the work: "Indeed a suicide did take place (I do not yet know whether it was the doctor), it was followed by murder, a murder inflamed into fury by exactly that suicide, the suicide preceded by an orgy, the orgy by a series of communions in the act of coitus, both natural and illegal, by sodomists who dictated their characters upon weaker flesh, and copulations which failed as well as fornications which captured pure smell of the fact and left the lovers fluxed with the rhythms and reflexes of one another. It was a ball." That a good deal of rather flabby philosophising is stuffed into the interstices (I may be pardoned the word as it seems a favourite of Mailer's) of this recent work does not obscure the central subject, as Mailer makes evident when he states that "we had to write our way out into the unspoken territories of sex."

Pace Mr. Mailer, who is a rare bruiser for a fight—as *Advertisements for Myself* clearly shows—I do not equate sex and pornography. But the idea of sexual orgies, and the emphasis in all his hipster writing on "the first tenet of the [hipster] faith: that one's orgasm is the clue to how well one is living", suggests that he is at least starting with the pornographic situation. Finally, in "A Note to the Reader" at the beginning of *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer lists what he believes are "the best pieces in this book": "The Man Who Studied Yoga" which centres on a scene in which three married couples watch a pornographic movie; "The White Negro", which deals with the hipster (for his faith, see above); "The Time of Her Time" of which four-fifths is some rather fully, though floridly, detailed descriptions of the narrator's "gymkhana" with Denise—"for Denise Gondelman was indeed her name" as he says, dropping for one appalling minute into the language of Victorian trash—; "Dead Ends" which is a poem one of the characters writes and then tears up (it is a shame Mailer did not follow suit); and finally the excerpts from the work in progress which we have already mentioned. (The reader who wishes to pursue this further might consult Drs. Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen's *Pornography and the Law*.) Whether Mailer succeeds as well as Fitzgerald did in handling the dangerous, almost intractable material of sentimentality, pornographic or nostalgic, remains to be seen.

It is here, perhaps, that we may note the role of tragedy, and its catharsis. The purging of the emotions of pity and terror is an externalizing, an objectifying process: it is directed outwards from the closed circle of the individual. Coddlingly indulging the emotion of pity (and presumably of terror) is the inverted form of

purging: the sentimental withdrawal into the subjective safety of a self-circling, emotional abstraction is the other side of the shared catharsis elicited by the public ritual of tragedy. An analogous polar relationship might be posited between pornography and obscenity.

These remarks are merely tentative. Any elaboration along this line would probably have to come to grips with the history of both sentimentality and pornography. One thing would immediately be apparent: the fact that neither of these elements seems to be present, in any sense that we understand, in classical literature. Catullus, perhaps, comes closest to sentimentality, and also, in a certain way, to the pornographic. But Ovid, Martial, Petronius, even the unknown authors of the *Priapea*, may be obscene; they are not pornographic. It would seem to be a question of the concept of the individual and hence, ultimately, a question of the subjective, psychological attitude to the person brought into the Graeco-Roman civilization with the advent of Christianity. In terms of tragedy, Kierkegaard, for one, has some very acute observations on this exact point. But that would need a much longer and more carefully documented treatment. All that this short note is intended to do is to raise a question by pointing out a relationship that is implicitly indicated in a casual remark made by Unamuno in an introduction to his *Three Exemplary Novels*: "so far as Spain is concerned women read two kinds of novels: those recommended by their confessors and those their confessors forbid, on the one hand sentimentality, on the other, pornography."