

POETICS OF SENTIMENTALITY

by RICK ANTHONY FURTAK

IN HIS MAJOR WORK, *The Passions*, Robert Solomon argues that emotions are judgments.¹ Through a series of persuasive examples, he shows that emotions are best understood as mental states which involve certain beliefs about the world. This means that every emotion has an object: if I am angry at John for stealing my car, the object of my anger is the fact (or what I take to be a fact) that my car has been stolen by John. If I find out that this is not the case, that my car has not even left the garage, then my anger should vanish along with its justification.² The key point here is that anger, like any other emotion, may be reasonable or inappropriate depending on the situation. If there is nothing to be angry about, then it would be irrational for me to cultivate anger simply because I enjoy having this particular emotion. In general, emotional responses are cognitively flawed whenever they are at odds with the properties of their objects. If we want our judgments to be realistic and not delusional, then we must avoid this kind of error.

It is curious, then, that Solomon has written an essay in which he categorically declares that “there is *nothing* wrong with sentimentality.”³ For it would appear that his theory of emotion provides precisely the terms needed in order to specify what *is* wrong with it. If emotions are judgments, then “sentimentality” ought to be an important critical term to designate the habit of having emotions that involve either impaired or mistaken judgment. Nevertheless, Solomon is willing to defend any and every episode of tender emotion, of the kind associated with the

death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (*S*, p. 240). He suggests that the more we can muster up this sort of response to literature or life, the better. What he seeks to encourage, in other words, is what Hume would call “delicacy” of (aesthetic) taste and of (ethical) passion.⁴ But while Hume acknowledges that sensitivity to beauty and to ugliness are two sides of the same coin, such that anyone who is susceptible to lively enjoyments is also liable to undergo pungent sorrows, Solomon wants to promote only the tender aspect of emotion.

On the principle of passionate maximization, it is good if I can be tenderly affected by a poem—any poem! The problem with such crass emotion-stoking is that it precludes the possibility of distinguishing between, for instance, the two stanzas below. Both are by Wilfred Owen: the first was written in 1914 and the second in 1918.⁵

I

O meet it is and passing sweet
 To live in peace with others,
 But sweeter still and far more meet
 To die in war for brothers.

II

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Only if emotions did not involve rational judgment could a person’s passionate response to these two stanzas be a matter of indifference. But it seems that, on the contrary, an essential component of understanding them is recognizing that they express irreconcilable cognitive attitudes. The tone of the 1918 stanza is strikingly different from that of the earlier one, even though they share roughly the same topic. The latter stanza is stark and ominous, and filled with vivid detail; the one from 1914 is sweet and vague. Clearly, we might describe the earlier of the two as “sentimental”—the question is, what kind of judgment does

it involve? I suggest that its insipid jingles endorse the view that war is a delightful opportunity to nurture brotherhood and gain a happy death. But to share in the celebration of this evaluative attitude, to see war as nothing other than this, we must shield ourselves from the other side of the story. Sentimental emotion, since it needs to be tender, depends upon the representation of its objects as pleasant and ingenuous. If the properties that would elicit a sentimental response are absent in a given object, then the sentimentalist can sustain his mood only by projecting them onto it. And, as Mark Jefferson points out, such distortion is of “overtly moral significance.”⁶ Are we interested in knowing what war is like for one of the “brothers” of the earlier poem’s misty generalizations? Or have we decided in advance to feel a certain way about it, regardless of the facts?

From the point of view of the poet, what is at stake here is the difference between an accurate representation of the past and a revisionist history which alters one’s own emotional memories in order to ignore whatever does not arouse feelings of sweet tender sentimentality. Unless we are willing to regard truth and falsity as malleable, like the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it appears that we have good reason to condemn the sentimentalist. Again, however, Solomon is on the defensive:

Nostalgia as sentimentality is the ability to focus upon or remember something pleasant in the midst of what may have in fact been tragedy and horror; for example, old soldiers fondly remember the camaraderie of a campaign and forget the terror, bloodshed, and death that surrounded them. But why should this be cause for attack and indignation? (S, p. 244)

Whether or not attack and indignation are appropriate, this kind of distortion of the truth, for the sake of having the emotions one wants to have, is positively deplorable. If Solomon would defend a person’s aesthetic “right” to enjoy the first Owen poem while deliberately ignoring the second, then we might appeal to ethical categories in answering him. For example, what if the First World War and other catastrophes were kept alive in public memory by nothing other than jingoistic, greeting-card kitsch? Would this not be a misrepresentation, and one with potentially dangerous consequences? Owen himself has the tone of a moralist when he links an emphatic truth claim with a call for appropriate emotional response. In a preface drafted just before his death, the poet writes:

My subject is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. . . . All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.⁷

If an emotion depends upon, or is identical to, a judgment which is false, then it embodies a cognitive flaw: sentimentality is, or at least involves, such a flaw. Sentimental art does not present its objects as they are, but as a self-deceived Pollyanna would like them to be. But “*Dulce Et Decorum Est*” (the 1918 poem which opens with stanza II above) is not unsentimental by virtue of its focus on an unhappy truth: to indulge in negative emotion for its own sake would be just as dishonest as to indulge in false tender feelings. It is only that, in this case, the truth happens to be brutal, and it would be a distortion to give it a different coloring. Here is the poem’s conclusion, which tells of a soldier who has been asphyxiated:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

The “friend” addressed in the fourth from last line is not only the unrepentant sentimentalist Jessie Pope (author of war poems for children from back in England, to whom “*Dulce Et Decorum Est*” is dedicated) but also Owen’s younger self, writing the stuff he was writing in 1914. This poem is meant to instigate a cognitive reorientation, and consequently a changed moral attitude, toward the war. It is not only unsentimental but anti-sentimental: it explicitly repudiates the kind of falsity that sentimentality is. Having experienced the war, Owen was incapable of writing a poem like the first one ever again: it gave an atrociously sweet and tender representation of a painful and ugly reality. It troubled him to think that anyone could be so ignorant of the horror of war as to tolerate the poetic celebration of its sweet brother-

hood in isolation from any of its other properties. This, by Owen's own account, had to do with the discovery of truths to which he had previously been ignorant: truths which required a certain kind of emotional response. To have only fond memories of a horrible war, one must selectively forget many bitter experiences. Apart from the basic untruth of distorting the object (war *does* also involve pain, and is *not* so enjoyable), this fond forgetfulness has the added fault of being obtuse—it demonstrates a failure to have learned from one's own passionate experience.

Like any other representational art form, narrative poetry (or lyric poetry with strong narrative content) can represent its object in various ways. So, after Housman's "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" has encouraged us to see professional soldiers as heroes of Biblical proportions, MacDiarmid's poetic answer makes us consider them in a different light:⁸

Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries (l. 5–8)

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
 They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
 What God abandoned, these defended,
 And saved the sum of things for pay.

Another Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries (l. 1–4)

It is a God-damned lie to say that these
 Saved, or knew, anything worth any man's pride.
 They were professional murderers and they took
 Their blood money and impious risks and died.

MacDiarmid may have been harsh in dismissing Housman's epitaph as rampant sentimentality: but the first poem is clearly an example of kitsch, if we define this as art that overlooks the unsettling features of reality in order to appeal exclusively to the tender sentiments.⁹ Solomon, who also links kitsch with sentimentality, is in favor of unapologetic appeal to the soft, sweet sentiments. Since kitsch evokes what he calls the best of our emotions, it is worthy of defense for its uncanny ability to fuel sentimentality. Never mind if it encourages us to distort reality for the sake of indulging in whatever emotions we most enjoy. Art can be open to ethical criticism, Solomon believes, only if we have misbehaved in producing it. So it is appropriate to relish Little Nell's death

while shuddering at “a bar stool whose legs are actual, stuffed buffalo legs” (*S*, p. 229).¹⁰ But this confines ethical criticism to extraneous evaluation of the actions of artists, and excludes the moral force that Owen and MacDiarmid consider to be an aspect of poetry itself. Life, as Lorca says, is not a dream; and real girls do not tend to be as gleefully obsequious as Nell, any more than real mercenaries tend to be concerned about propping up the heavens and protecting the wretched of the earth. When we insist upon seeing only what we want to see, we are blind to realities that do not correspond with our rose-tinted wishes: it is not the only virtue of literature that it may help us to avoid this kind of blindness, but it is a major vice of much *bad* writing that it has the effect of encouraging it.

Admittedly, human beings can bear only so much reality, and any of us would collapse under the emotional burden of sustaining an awareness of every disturbing truth; nonetheless, a life lived in willful ignorance of all such truths would be fantastically out of touch with the actual world. Sentimentality involves a wistful turning-away from reality and an escape into a safe fantasy world that is fully under control.¹¹ But, as Epictetus continually says, every emotion involves an element of uncontrol, by virtue of its relation to some aspect of a world in which we are not omnipotent. The most pernicious risk of sentimental emotion is that, by seeing things as they are not, we lose the basic engagement with reality that emotion depends upon in the first place. In speaking as if critics of false emotion must be opponents of emotion in general, Solomon misses this connection altogether. By making a habit of seeking certain emotions for their own sake without concern for justification, we end up numb to the conditions of justification and incapable of responding to new situations that *should* provoke emotion. In other words, if we cultivate tender emotion as a kind of delicacy while disregarding what it is *about*, we cut ourselves off from the sensitive experience that was the initial condition of any emotion at all. Instead of advocating sentimentality as a form of spiritual exercise, Owen notes the happiness of a soldier enjoying pleasant emotions at home, ignorant of the suffering of others, then curses “dullards whom no cannon stuns,” appalled that “they should be as stones.”¹² Here is how his poem “Insensibility” ends:

By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;

Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

Owen is not in favor of eliminating emotion. He thinks we ought to share in the eternal reciprocity of tears, only not on false terms. He recognizes that it is those indifferent to the truth who are the real opponents of emotion, not those who force the issue of truth by rejecting sentimentality.

Solomon himself does not mean to argue for insensibility—this is made clear in another essay, in which he takes issue with the view that *The Stranger* by Camus shows a character who should be admired for his emotional truthfulness.¹³ It is not, Solomon argues, admirable to lack emotional falsity by virtue of lacking any emotions whatsoever. But if a person were positively affected by everything, he would also find himself in an absurd situation: a night in which all cows are indistinguishably tender, and all objects are stripped of their particular significance. Solomon often writes as if he imagines himself to be surrounded by Stoics; in wanting to defend emotion against those who think it is *never* warranted, he has his heart in the right place. But he does his cause a disservice when he makes the implausible argument that it is *always* justified. Much more likely is the claim that emotion can be more or less appropriate depending on whether or not it is mistaken, dishonest, excessive, inadequate, or otherwise flawed. When Solomon lists some of the alleged faults of sentimentality—such as that it is hypocritical, distorted, superficial, escapist, self-congratulating, manipulative, or simply false—it appears that he is on his way to separating the terrain of emotions worthy of defense from those that are indefensible. It is an unfortunate disappointment, then, when he refuses to accept any but the least critical definition of “sentimentality” (after considering others) or to regard its pejorative connotations as anything but evidence of prejudice (*S*, pp. 226–34). If there indeed exist such enemies of emotion as Solomon imagines, they are likely to see the faults he dismisses as proof that all emotion is disreputable.

But he has not ruined everything for those, like Owen, who want to defend the possibility of real emotion by banishing those passions that involve falsity and insisting on the legitimacy of those that remain. This kind of distinction is what the concept of sentimentality, when used discriminately, enables us to make. Distinguishing truth from falsity within the category of emotion is a more complicated task than making

a blanket defense of all members of the category. To the extent that we could succeed in doing this, however, we would demonstrate that it is possible to be emotional without being stupid. It is one thing to argue that emotion is a form of epistemic evaluation, and quite another to show that it can avoid the irrationality to which other kinds of judgment are liable. Solomon takes the first step, but declines to make the second: in this, Wilfred Owen is already way ahead of him, showing that poetry can encourage real emotions and make us less susceptible to sentimental ones.¹⁴

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

I would like to thank Ted Cohen, Anne Eaton, Alex Neill, Kate Thomson, Denis Dutton, and Martha Nussbaum for helpful discussion and comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 58th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, and all those who attended the session on "Ethics and the Response to Art" are also thanked.

1. Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 8–15.
2. *The Passions*, pp. 111–19.
3. "In Defense of Sentimentality," in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 225–45; quotation from p. 226. This is a revision of an essay first published in *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE* 14 (1990): 304–23. Unless otherwise noted, I cite the more recent version, hereafter abbreviated S.
4. Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 3–8.
5. Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983). The first stanza is taken from an unfinished ballad, vol. 2, pp. 503–7, the second from "Dulce Et Decorum Est," vol. 1, p. 140.
6. Mark Jefferson, "What is Wrong With Sentimentality?," *Mind* 92 (1983): 527.
7. Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol. 2, p. 535.
8. Both poems appear in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams et al., 6th ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 1,824 and 2,213.
9. See the definition by Tomas Kulka in *Kitsch and Art* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1996), pp. 26–27.
10. This example does not appear in the original version of the essay published in *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE*.
11. Cf. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 492.

12. See S, pp. 244–45. “Insensibility” by Owen is on pp. 145–46, vol. 1, of *The Complete Poems and Fragments*. I cite lines 1–2 and 5–10 of the sixth stanza.
13. Robert C. Solomon, “*L’Étranger* and the Truth,” *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE* 2 (1978): 141–59.
14. “Poetry—excites us to artificial feelings—makes us callous to real ones.” This remark is attributed to Coleridge by Geoffrey Hill in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 4.