

## the power of sympathy

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In 1786 by a fireside in Paris the Heart informed the Head that nature had allotted to head only the field of science—squaring of circles, tracing of comets, strengthening of arches; Heart gladly surrendered all science to Head. “In like manner [Heart continued] in denying to you the feelings of sympathy, of benevolence, of gratitude, of justice, of love, of friendship, she has excluded you from their controul.” Here the Heart controls. “Morals were too essential to the happiness of man to be risked on the incertain combinations of the head. She laid their foundation therefore in sentiment, not in science.” Heart and sentiment nature gave to all, but head and science to only a few. Continuing, Heart reminded Head that he had advised Heart not to help a soldier at Chickahominy, not to give to the poor woman in Philadelphia, because she looked like a drunkard, and in the American Revolution not to stand against superior wealth and numbers. “In short, my friend, . . . I do not know that I ever did a good thing on your suggestion, or a dirty one without it.” So did Heart in the last speech in their dialogue triumph over the Head as reported approvingly by Thomas Jefferson, a man formed by the Age of Reason and devoted to its principles whether formulated in France or Britain.<sup>1</sup>

In 1829 in the small college community of Burlington, Vermont, James Marsh, worried by such sentimental excesses of the heart as those described by Jefferson, published the first American edition of an English book that pleads for a return to the old virtue of “Manhood or Manliness,” for lives ordered by “Law and Light.” The author asked the age to exercise “manly energy,” “Fortitude,” and “Strength of Character” in following the “Dictates of Reason”; the age must not “substitute shapeless feelings, sentiments, impulses,” for “Law and Light.” “If Prudence, though practically inseparable from Morality, is not to be confounded with the Moral Principle; still less may Sensibility, i.e., a constitutional quickness of Sympathy with Pain and Pleasure, and a keen sense of the gratifications that accompany social intercourse, mutual endearments, and reciprocal preferences, be mistaken, or deemed a Substitute for

either.” A man who is “naturally sympathetic” may use half his property to save a friend; “the same man shall afterwards exhibit the same disregard of money in an attempt to seduce that friend’s Wife or Daughter.” So wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a man formed by the Romantic Age and devoted to its principles whether put forth in Germany or Britain.<sup>2</sup>

These two homilies may serve to remind us that we must watch diligently for the creeping clichés that move into our generalities about cultural, philosophical, political, economic and religious ages. The age of Jefferson was dominated by men educated mainly in the materials of the Greek and Roman classics, the Enlightenment, the moral philosophers and psychologists of England and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century. However high a place Reason and the Head might have in the other materials, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Jefferson’s favorite Kames, Adam Smith and countless others—even Burke and Hume—gave a high place to the Heart. At the lugubrious, sentimental extreme, the Eighteenth Century could let the heart carry it away into tearful spasms or faintings unimagined even by Shelley or Poe. In summarizing Maynard Mack’s contribution to a panel discussion, Roger P. McCutcheon writes: “The eighteenth century was not cold; it was wet and it became much wetter as the years went by. Theatre audiences wept copiously. The German poet Gellert, reading one of Richardson’s novels was so affected that his tears soaked his handkerchief, the book, the table, and the floor.”<sup>3</sup> While these are primarily literary examples we must remember that art and life flowed together for the eighteenth century: on one concept of sympathy, systems of ethics, psychology, aesthetics, politics, economics, medicine and cosmology might be founded.

And certainly the concept of sympathy provides one of the most exciting—if also confusing and baffling—ways to see the heart taking its place in the makeup of the personalities of those who created the age of Jefferson. Here we can make only a few suggestions about the operation of sympathy in the affairs of the Revolution and the early republic. Let us first take a small example from Jefferson himself. In numerous references Jefferson makes it clear how much he owes to one of the most influential writers in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century America, Henry Home, Lord Kames, whose various works, especially *The Elements of Criticism*, appeared in edition after edition and were used in most of the important colleges and universities of the country. Kames (usually spelled *Kaims* by Jefferson) relies heavily on certain of the prevailing doctrines of sympathy to justify his positions. Eleanor Davidson Berman points out how much Jefferson follows Kames who, “basing himself upon the Burkian concept of sympathy,” commends gardening as an art: Kames wrote “. . . gardening, which inspires the purest and most refined pleasures, cannot fail to promote every good affection. The gaiety and harmony of mind it produceth, inclining the spectator to communicate his satisfaction to others and to make them happy as he is himself, tend

naturally to establish in him a habit of humanity and benevolence." One need only mention a single sentence of Jefferson's much quoted position to make the similarity clear: "Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example." Mrs. Berman cites Jefferson's plans for gardens and architecture of the University of Virginia that would by their arousal of academic gaiety and harmony of mind produce sympathetic reactions thus creating habits of "humanity and benevolence" in the students.<sup>4</sup>

While we do know that Jefferson was much influenced by Kames, Burke, Hume and others who give a large place to sympathy in their systems, the point of the illustration is not to demonstrate the direct influence of Kames on Jefferson or on any of his contemporaries but rather to suggest that in all the affairs of the age of Jefferson, from whatever literary or oral source it might come, the concept of sympathy was likely to enter. Whether one went to William and Mary with Jefferson or with others to Harvard, Union, Dartmouth or Yale, sympathy was there. Even at Princeton Madison might have heard John Witherspoon, staunch Presbyterian politician and later signer of the Declaration of Independence, trying to absorb the concept without really changing his course of lectures, published as *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*: "Some of late have made sympathy the standard of virtue, particularly Smith in his Theory of Moral Sentiments. He says we have a certain feeling, by which we sympathize, and as he calls it, go along with what appears to be right." We can almost hear the gentlemanly sniff as he concludes, "This is but a new phraseology for the moral sense."<sup>5</sup>

Witherspoon illustrates one of the hazards a student encounters in tracing the concept of sympathy through this age: each "moral philosopher" may have his own phrase for an idea that turns out to be what others call sympathy. As Benjamin Rush recognized, this confusion was partly imported, even though Americans did their part. In 1786, the year Jefferson's Heart and Head were conversing in Paris, Rush was saying in an oration in Philadelphia:

The moral faculty has received different names from different authors. It is the "moral sense" of Dr. Hutcheson—the "sympathy" of Dr. Adam Smith—the "moral instinct" of Rousseau—and "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world" of St. John. I have adopted the term of moral faculty from Dr. Beattie, because I conceive it conveys with the most perspicuity, the idea of a power in the mind, of chusing good and evil.<sup>6</sup>

One wonders what Adam Smith—or for that matter St. John—might have thought of these synonyms for *sympathy*. But equivalencies like these are widespread in the age and not merely idiosyncracies of Witherspoon and Rush. From the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, a wide variety of terms, extending far beyond such obvious ones as *heart*,

*benevolence, social affections, affinities*, undoubtedly evoked associations at least with the doctrine of sympathy.

Whatever its name we can be sure we are in the presence of sympathy when someone like Jefferson puts himself in the place of the poor soldier at Chickahominy and feels with him. "For sympathy," in the words of Edmund Burke, "must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected. . . ."7 Some might say with the Scottish rhetorician, George Campbell in 1776, that "Sympathy is not a passion, but that quality of the soul which renders it susceptible of almost any passion, by communication from the bosom of another. It is by sympathy we *rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep.*"8 Others like Thomas Reid might more closely attach it to the "benevolent affection": "It is impossible that there can be benevolent affection without sympathy, both with the good and bad fortune of the object; and it appears to be impossible that there can be sympathy without benevolent affection."9 It is with this latter attachment that Benjamin Franklin most concerned himself: all Americans, one supposes, have grown up with Franklin's pleas for "Benevolence" dangled before them. "The Blessings of Benevolence" as seen by Franklin have been well described by Mr. Paul W. Conner in his recent work on Franklin's political theories.10

Benjamin Franklin reminds us that in intellectual life beyond ethics, and social and political theory, sympathy also played a significant part. As William Adams summarized it in 1850, the age was aware of the many scientific "miracles" that sympathy was said to have wrought through the ages: "The Philosophy of ancient Greece and of Middle-age Europe, teems with the wonders of that miraculous principle, Sympathy." Certain precious stones had sympathies with particular people; "even the influence of the stars shed their virtues upon men by Sympathy" and herbs worked their healing through sympathy. Adams continued:

And, stranger still, wounds could be healed at a distance by an ointment whose force depended upon "Sympathy," the ointment being smeared upon the weapon, not upon the wound! In fact, he that shall look at the works of "Baptista Porta," or "Albertus Magnus," shall find there the strangest Natural Philosophy ever dreamed of, and all of it founded upon the one principle, Sympathy.11

New discoveries in magnetism and electricity by Franklin and others had evoked in the age of Jefferson many of these associations with the past: electricity was found to operate according to certain principles of attraction and repulsion like benevolence and self-love in human psychology. Out of these many associations grew serious scientific theories and fanciful conclusions. One child of the age, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, in his poem *The World or Instability* shows us what was happening to Newtonian science: of Newton he writes

By him this law was strong Attraction called,  
 By others Gravitation, else Impulsion,  
 In Elements affinity becoming;  
 While in the mental world sweet *Sympathy*.  
 The names are many, but all mean the same  
 Divine and binding law that thro' the space  
 And time, upholds, directs, connects and binds  
 Those rolling spheres, huge massive globes of earth  
 And other matter, where we dwell and live. . . .<sup>12</sup>

The pervasive influence of sympathy, its identification with the development of science as well as other intellectual disciplines, is demonstrated further by its use in medicine. The celebrated eighteenth century English physician John Hunter “conceived of life as having an existence independent of structure and organization, a force like magnetism or electricity, which was mysteriously superadded to organic matter”; he likewise made much of the “actions of sympathy” in the human body by which a change in one part affects all others.<sup>13</sup> His theories were developed and extended in the United States in such studies as those reported in *An Inaugural Dissertation on Sympathy* . . . submitted to the medical faculty of the University of Pennsylvania in June, 1799, by Arthur May as he received his degree in medicine.<sup>14</sup>

If “sweet Sympathy” had its place in science, it certainly also had its place in the arts. We have noticed Jefferson’s concern with sympathy in his aesthetics. And now we should be reminded how pervasive in our early literature was the sentimental sweet sympathy of the eighteenth century in England. It is the concept of sympathy that carries us from the scientific order of Newton and Franklin to the mysterious affinities of sympathetic family relationships in the first significant American novel, *The Power of Sympathy: or, The Triumph of Nature. Founded in Truth*, published in Boston in 1789. As the novel shows, the ties of incestuous, sympathetic love can be as shocking as the electrical bolt from heaven and Americans can easily dissolve into the sentiment and sensibility of Sterne. The hero of *The Power of Sympathy* sympathizes (feels with) the slave mother who is “ever disposed to Sympathize with” her children and take the whip for them. The hero exclaims:

Hail *Sensibility!* Sweetener of the joys of life! Heaven has implanted thee in the breasts of his children—to soothe the sorrows of the afflicted—to mitigate the wounds of the stranger who falleth in our way. . . .

From thee! Author of Nature! from thee, thou inexhaustible spring of love supreme, floweth this tide of affection and Sympathy—thou whose tender care extendeth to the least of thy creation—and whose eye is not inattentive even though a sparrow fall to the ground.<sup>15</sup>

Historians have begun to recognize the importance of the concept of sympathy in the literary works of mid-nineteenth century American writers; some historians have seen its importance in other intellectual con-

cerns of the second and third quarters of the Nineteenth Century. It must also be recognized that even in the age of Jefferson reason and the head did not usurp the power of sympathy and the heart.

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### footnotes

1. Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Maria Cosway, October 12, 1786, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1954), X, 450-451.
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character . . .*, ed. James Marsh (Burlington, 1829), 31-33, 126.
3. Roger P. McCutchen, "Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics: A Search for Surviving Values," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, X (July, 1957), 290.
4. *Thomas Jefferson Among the Arts* (New York, 1947), 160-161 and *passim*.
5. *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (Princeton, 1912), 25-26.
6. *An Oration . . . 27th of February 1786; Containing an Enquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes upon the Moral Faculty* (Philadelphia, n.d.), 5.
7. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London, 1958), 44.
8. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Carbondale, Ill., 1963), 131.
9. *Essay on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1788), 162.
10. *Poor Richard's Politicks; Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order* (New York, 1965), 21-31.
11. *The Elements of Christian Science; A Treatise upon Moral Philosophy and Practice* (Philadelphia, 1850), 188.
12. *The World or Instability* (Gainesville, Fla., 1965), 12.
13. John Kobler, *The Reluctant Surgeon; A Biography of John Hunter* (Garden City, New York, 1960), 107-108.
14. Arthur May, *An Inaugural Dissertation on Sympathy . . .* (Philadelphia, 1799).
15. William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy* (Boston, 1961), 68.