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Henry Mackenzie's Ruined Feelings: Romance, Race, and the Afterlife of Sentimental Exchange*

James D. Lilley

IN ONE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S most influential romances, we are introduced to a restless young man who abandons his sleepy hometown, eager to try his fortunes in the big city. He meets a girl. Though separated by massive disparities in wealth, education, and social stature, they nevertheless cast "wooing glances" at each other and begin a courtship.¹ Consumed by the common desire that unites them, their passion for each other quickly grows. But, as the narrator of the romance is quick to remind us, "the course of true love never did run smooth" (*C* 202): in his dealings with the rapacious city-dwellers, our hero is forced to sacrifice the homespun values he acquired during his youth. It is as if each exchange with these men of the world effects a gothic metamorphosis in the nature of our protagonist's being; and his lover soon begins to question which of these dueling personalities is real and which a horrific, spectral apparition.

Though the adventures of the commodity in Marx's *Capital* are not often read as a romance, the fact that they exhibit some of the same thematic concerns and aesthetic gestures as the sentimental romance is worthy of remark.² It is tempting to brush aside these moments in the text as narrative flourishes that help to clarify our understanding of—and engage our interest in—complex economic concepts. Viewed from this perspective, Marx is simply manipulating the tropes of romance in order to make his ideological point. But what if the relationship between romance and commodity exchange runs deeper than the symbols that they share?

In this essay I argue that Marx writes a romance because *capitalism is structured like romance*, because commodity exchange and romantic desire share the same aesthetics of valuation.³ Focusing on two of Henry Mackenzie's wildly popular novels of sensibility, *The Man of Feeling* (1771) and *Julia de Roubigné* (1777), I show how the sentimental romance produces two qualitatively distinct kinds of affective value: on the one hand,

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feeling is valued because it functions as a principle of public exchange, enabling the affective subject to participate as a “man of the world” in a community or a politics of feeling; but at the same time, feeling is also esteemed as a totally private essence, a material fact of the subject’s own singular personality and unique, homespun history. The mystery of sentimental exchange is rooted in the peculiar way that these two value-forms interrelate. Like the optical illusion of the Rubin vase, where the observer sees either a vase or two facial profiles but never sees both of these images at the same time, I argue that affection’s public “exchange-value” and private “use-value” can each appear and distinguish itself only to the extent that it obscures our view of the other. While scholars often read the sentimental romance as a democratizing genre in which marginalized subjects, excluded by their gender or their race, can make their feelings heard in the public sphere, I explore instead the ideology of ruin that obscures private feeling and enables these democratic political values to be publicized and exchanged. At the same time that Mackenzie’s “men of feeling” bring sympathy and emotion into view as universal and public principles of political community, they also mourn the ruin of utterly private feeling that such publicity entails. Rather than simply championing liberal principles of freedom, charity, and public equality, the sentimental romance secretly desires the prestige of singular and private differences that have been ruined by, and excluded from, this new political community and its concepts of universal feelings and rights. By examining how this erotics of private ruin fragments heterosexual desire and stains the body with the fateful force of race, I show how the aesthetics of romance inflect the formal structure of our modern systems of identity and exclusion.

The Specters and the Spectacle of Affection

Sensibility constitutes the very egoism of the I, *which is sentient and not something sensed*. Man as measure of all things, that is, measured by nothing, comparing all things but incomparable, is affirmed in the sensing of sensation. Sensation breaks up every system.

—Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*⁴

Sentimental romance claims to register the presence of an acutely private, affective self. And further: these feelings are never simple, accidental exfoliations of selfhood. To be human is to be a self that exercises feeling. Thinkers as diverse as Rousseau, Laurence Sterne, and Adam Smith all

agree on this fundamental precept of sentimentality, on this definitive structure of sentimental selfhood. And yet, as the pages of sentimental romance demonstrate, there is a constitutive queerness to this sensing self, a peculiarity that patterns all economies of sentimental desire. For it is never enough for this self to emote and to feel in isolation: in order to register its essential humanity, this self must disclose itself, must direct its interiority outward, must cry public tears that somehow materialize and bear witness to its private core. Such a self can know itself only insofar as it is a self *for another*, only through the act of transforming its absolute privacy into a communal sentimental spectacle. The radically private self-for-itself never participates in the pages of romance or the lyrics of longing.

No mere literature of self-indulgent desire and confession, the sentimental romance thus engages in an intimately social dialectics of recognition. For Fredric Jameson, romance bestows difference “not by any particular characteristics of [the other], but simply as a function of [the other’s] relationship to my own place”;⁵ and we see this same dialectical structure at work in the Earl of Shaftesbury’s *Sensus Communis* (1709), one of the most important texts in the development of an eighteenth-century “culture of sensibility”:

If eating and drinking be natural, herding is so too. If any appetite or sense be natural, the sense of fellowship is the same. If there be anything of nature in that affection which is between the sexes, the affection is certainly as natural towards the consequent offspring and so again between the offspring themselves, as kindred and companions, bred under the same discipline and economy. And thus a clan or tribe is gradually formed, a public is recognized, and, besides the pleasure found in social entertainment, language and discourse, there is so apparent a necessity for continuing this good correspondency and union that to have no sense or feeling of this kind, no love of country, community or anything in common, would be the same as to be insensible even of the plainest means of self-preservation and most necessary condition of self-enjoyment.⁶

Shaftesbury’s prose warps here under the weight of its aesthetic task: how can “affection” operate as both a privatized “condition of self-enjoyment” and a “public” dialectic that holds country and community together? To the extent that Shaftesbury’s syntax elevates the affective value of communal “discipline and economy,” its feeling subject is obscured and reduced to a position of utter passivity: “a clan or tribe *is* gradually formed”; “a public *is* recognized” (emphasis mine). It is as if the only sign of the “plainest” and most “natural” form of private feeling is found whispered within subjunctive speculations (“If eating and drinking be natural. . . . If any appetite or sense be natural. . . . If there be anything of nature”) or trapped negatively in the folds of tautology (either sensibility

produces “good correspondency and union” or else humans are “insensible”). One of the many paradoxes of sentimentality—of the powerful ties that bind self to other, mother to child, individual to “clan,” citizen to “country”—is that this sympathetic public “union” can be registered only at the threshold of its private occlusion.

In one of *The Man of Feeling*'s more memorable vignettes, the hero of Henry Mackenzie's much-loved novel is approached by a beggar and his dog. After hearing the beggar's sad tale of misfortune and illness, Harley decides to give him some money and, while finalizing this charitable transaction, he reflects on the intricacies of sentimental exchange:

Harley had drawn a shilling from his pocket; but virtue bade him consider on whom he was going to bestow it.—Virtue held back his arm:—but a milder form, a younger sister of virtue's, . . . smiled upon him: His fingers lost their compression;—nor did virtue offer to catch the money as it fell. It had no sooner reached the ground than the watchful cur (a trick he had been taught) snapped it up; and, contrary to the most approved method of stewardship, delivered it immediately into the hands of his master.⁷

A wonderfully gothic spectacle, Mackenzie's romance of the “shilling” anticipates both the argument and the imagery of *Capital*'s analysis of commodity fetishism. While Marx's hero is magically transformed by exchange into a table that “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (*C* 163), Mackenzie's coin similarly turns the tables on the human bystanders, taking on a public, circus life of its own while reducing Harley to passive indecision and making a “master” of the beggar's “watchful cur.” Although this charitable exchange goes to great imaginative and pecuniary lengths to equalize the differences between Harley and the beggar, these humanitarian elaborations end up reinforcing, rather than dissolving, the materiality and thinghood of the sentimental commodity. Even and especially when Mackenzie attempts to personify and humanize exchange, imagining “Virtue” and her siblings navigating its proper sympathetic course, his public spectacle of charity paradoxically brings forward a technical procession of dehumanized things—pockets, arms, fingers, dogs—that effect the currency's slow-motion transfer. As if to restrict the cur's agency and reinsert a sense of the human, Mackenzie's parenthetical assertion that the dog had been taught this trick seems a desperate tactic, lest we forget who his true “master” is.

“There is no use of money . . . equal to that of beneficence,” a stranger admits to Harley later in the novel: “with the profuse, it is lost; . . . but here the enjoyment grows on reflection, and our money is most truly ours, when it ceases being in our possession” (*MF* 34). It is this strange afterlife of the sentimental shilling that lends such a melancholy hue

to Mackenzie's fiction. The economy of "beneficence" practiced by the man of feeling will emerge in contradistinction to the "profuse" spending of an infected urban and mercantile class. Never at home with the luxury and commerce of the city (he is thoroughly tricked and taken advantage of during his brief visit to London), Harley instead outlines a spectral, other-worldly economy, a system of affective values that appear only to the extent that they have already been lost, already antiqued and consigned to pastoral prehistory or anticipated in the afterlife. "There are some feelings which perhaps are too tender to be suffered by the world," avers Harley at the close of the novel. "The world is in general selfish, interested, and unthinking, and throws the imputation of romance or melancholy on every temper more susceptible than its own. I cannot think but in those regions which I contemplate, if there is any thing of mortality left about us, that these feelings will subsist;—they are called,—perhaps they are—weaknesses here;—but there may be some better modifications of them in heaven" (*MF* 95). Though such sepia-toned "regions," where pure affection is finally accorded its proper value, are part of sentimentality's critique of the world of commerce, they nevertheless possess their own economy—an ethereal yet absolute tyranny of ownership where the affective commodity is all the more "ours" for its invisibility, all the more valuable for its nonparticipation in the secular world of "selfish" exchange. "There is a sympathetic enjoyment," notes Mackenzie in the *Mirror*, "which often makes it not only better, but more delightful to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasting";⁸ and in *Fleetwood*, William Godwin's astute reworking of *The Man of Feeling*, such painful pleasure is denoted "by the term reverie, when the mind . . . is swallowed up in a living death, which, at the same time that it is indolent and inert, is not destitute of a certain voluptuousness."⁹ Far from short-circuiting the logic of capitalism, these luxurious gothic "regions" share the material extravagance of the fetish.

Economies of affection, like Marx's romance of the commodity, play out the tension between an authentic, interior value (an utterly private feeling) and its subsequent corruption within the public exchange. By treating affection as an exchangeable, communal thing—a universal, totally impersonal commodity that congeals our innermost identities and desires—the private exercise of our own unique feelings becomes strangely irrelevant. In order both to rescue private feeling from its public commodification and to reinforce its status as a universal human attribute, the economy of sentimental romance continues to circulate and value feeling, but only as an always-ruined and totally nonvaluable fragment. If commodity fetishism animates exchangeable things by lending them a private existence, then in the afterlife of affection private feeling is publicly euthanized, ruined. Death now infused into its form,

feeling comes back to life as an always-fragmented “living death.” The sentimental flâneur does not so much see or feel ruin as cast its shadow over the world: He *is* ruined feeling. Always a traveler, and destined to pass through the world, observing the decay that has been hardwired into his vision, his melancholy account of feeling’s ruined thing provides a fitting accompaniment to the “it-narrative,” a popular eighteenth-century romance form in which inanimate objects like Harley’s coin and the beggar’s dog come to life and tell their adventures in circulation.¹⁰

Tenderness Unutterable

In a moment of quite remarkable insight, the eponymous hero of Mackenzie’s final and most accomplished novel, *Julia de Roubigné*, declares that “Comedies and romances always end with a marriage, because, after that, there is nothing to be said.”¹¹ Her husband’s letters later reinforce this observation by pointing out that married bliss “is a sort of happiness that would not figure in narration” (*JR* 119). As Jane Austen’s work so vividly illustrates, pleasure and the fulfillment of desire play no part in the erotics of sentimentality. On the contrary, the man of feeling *ruins* sex and fragments bodily desire: melancholia, misfortune, and sickness name the conditions through which his subjectivity can sustain itself in the world. In the same way that *Sanditon*’s economy of wellness simultaneously heals and produces bodies in distress, so too the sentimental romance is marked by the mutual copresence of pleasure and pain. These two feelings are not to be read as separate but overlapping economies—one of pleasure and one of its lack—but, rather, as emotions that have now merged inseparably into each other, creating a new kind of pleasure that is always in pain, always *pained*. “I begin to suspect,” observes Julia’s true love, Savillon, “that the sensibility, of which young minds are proud, from which they look down with contempt, on the unfeeling multitude of ordinary men, is less a blessing than an inconvenience.—Why cannot I be as happy . . . as all the other good people around me?—I eat, and drink, and sing, nay I can be merry, like them; but they close the account, and set down this mirth for happiness; I retire to the family of my own thoughts, and find them in weeds of sorrow” (*JR* 110). Sentimental selves can only recognize themselves in the void that “sorrow” opens up in desire. Their pain is not one kind of feeling among others: it is the form that their emotionality must take if it is to hollow out an authentic presence, a living death, among the “unfeeling multitude.” And so when Julia describes the moment that she reluctantly gives her hand in marriage to the wealthy Montauban (rather than the poverty-stricken Savillon), her troubled language perfectly captures the

dialectical play of pleasure/pain and presence/absence that patterns all sentimental registration. "My father spoke first," Julia reports, "[but] not without hesitation. . . . At last, turning fuller towards me, who sat the silent *victim* of the scene, (why should I score through that word when writing to you? yet it is a bad one, and I pray you to forgive it,) he said, he knew his own unworthiness of that hand, which my generosity had now allowed him to hope for. . . . It is done, and I am Montauban's for ever!" (*JR* 68–9). Here Julia stamps her sentimental selfhood with her own bizarre imprimatur: "silent *victim*." Her victimhood simultaneously sustains and delimits her subjectivity.

The openness of epistolarity provides form for a discourse that finds solace in fragmentation and infinitely deferred desire. The sentimental romance needs to imagine a textual space in which the self can register and recognize itself without being exchanged for or cancelled out by an other: a found bundle of letters, stumbled across, barely touched, and then disclosed to the public, offers the perfect print cultural medium. Though the letters might have been exchanged within the sentimental community, it is vital that, as readers, we encounter them innocently and outside of any system of commercial, for-profit publication; or, as Mackenzie puts it in the introduction, such letters must never enter the narrative economy of plot since "they are made up of sentiment, which narrative would destroy" (*JR* 5). And so too in that rare moment when our sentimental heroes speak of pleasure and joy, it is "a sort of happiness that would not figure in narration" (*JR* 119). In much the same way that the beggar's "cur" facilitates the exchange of Harley's sentimental shilling—distinguishing his charitable action from a crass order of mercantile business—so too the narrator of *The Man of Feeling* relies on canine intervention in order to open the narrative economy of his text:

My dog [Rover] had made a point on a piece of fallow-ground, and led the curate and me two or three hundred yards . . . in a breathless state of expectation. . . .

I looked round . . . when I discovered, for the first time, a venerable pile. . . . An air of melancholy hung about it. . . .

"Some time ago," said [the curate], "a grave, oddish kind of man, boarded at a farmer's in this parish: The country people called him The Ghost. . . .

"Soon after I was made curate, he left the parish, and went no body knows whither; and in his room was found a bundle of papers. . . . I began to read them, but I soon grew weary of the task; for, besides that the hand is intolerably bad, I could never find the author in one strain for two chapters together: and I don't believe there is a single syllogism from beginning to end."

"I should be glad to see this medley," said I. "You shall see it now," answered the curate, "for I always take it along with me a-shooting." "How came it so torn?" "'Tis excellent wadding," said the curate.—This was a plea I was not in

condition to answer; for I had actually in my pocket great part of an edition of one of the German *Illustrissimi*, for the very same purpose. We exchanged books; and by that means (for the curate was a strenuous logician) we probably saved both. (*MF* 3–4)

While the beggar's dog works its magic by fragmenting Harley's participation in the economy of charity—providing the magical, nonhuman medium through which his shilling can be transferred to the beggar—here Rover and “The Ghost” help to fashion a similar spectacle of exchange. The narrative economy that they facilitate deemphasizes Mackenzie's participation in the exchange of textual commodities and, instead, creates an editorial illusion in which the narrator can be seen to rescue (rather than purchase) Harley's “medley.” The wonderfully intricate story of how Harley's letters end up as “wadding” in the curate's gun emphasizes both the fragmented incompleteness of his sentiments (their lack of a common narrative “strain”) and the vague precision of their elaborate journey from Harley to “The Ghost,” from the “farmer” to the curate, and finally—thanks to Rover—from the curate on to the narrator. Wadding is used to hold gunpowder in its proper place inside the barrel and, as such, its value is tied to a dialectic of substantiality: it must be heavy enough to act as a placeholder but not so bulky as to alter the bullet's course. Likewise, the narrator sustains and values Harley's letters at the threshold of their fragmentation and to the extent that they are deemed value-less within the more potent and bellicose economies of the world. At the same time that the narrator tries to obscure the sentimental commodity by emphasizing its public (non)value, he cannot help but bring forward its material thinghood—the intolerable “hand” of Harley's wadded writing and the palpable and “melancholy” air that hangs about his grave.

In the same way that the epistolary form of the sentimental romance produces the (non)valued fragments of its narrative economy, so too the erotic plot of *Julia de Roubigné* values symbolic tokens that materialize loss and fragmentation. Julia's vivid childhood fantasies, for example, eroticize the luxury of sorrow rather than any equalizing closure of desire: “Maria! in my hours of visionary indulgence, I have sometimes painted to myself a husband—no matter whom—comforting me amidst the distress which fortune had laid upon us. I have smiled upon him thorough my tears; tears, not of anguish, but of tenderness;—our children were playing around us, unconscious of misfortune. . . . I have imagined the luxury of such a scene, and affliction became a part of my dream of happiness” (*JR* 16). Such feelings of agonizing affection are so central to the work of sentimental romance that, as Julia's “no matter whom” illustrates, they render even the sentimental object that arouses that affection superfluous. This is why Carl Schmitt argues that, in the literature

of romance, “we can no longer speak of an object. This is because the object becomes the mere ‘occasion,’” for sentimental reverie.¹² And so too even Savillon’s physical body is strangely dispensable in the novel, his portrait providing the necessary “occasions” for Julia’s sentimental distress. The text goes even further by suggesting that such erotic fetishes are *even more erotic* than the sexual body that they fetishize; hence, the raciest moment of the novel occurs when Savillon and Julia merge registration and desire into a totally aestheticized erotics of servitude. “When our [Art] master was with us,” blushes Julia, “he used sometimes to guide my hand; when he was gone, at our practice of his instructions, Savillon commonly supplied his place. But Savillon’s hand was not like the other’s: I felt something from its touch not the less delightful from carrying a sort of fear along with that delight” (*JR* 144). Julia’s “fear” and Savillon’s surrogate mastery only add to the erotic charge of this sentimental exchange, an exchange in which the artistic canvas and the act of painting are relegated to mere aesthetic occasions through which they channel their pained desire.

Sentimental space thus occupies queer territory outside of the heteronormative emplotments of society—a space in which tearful orphans divulge their hearts to their same-sex friends. “To speak one’s distresses to the unfeeling, is terrible,” argues Savillon. “[E]ven to ask the alms of pity is humiliating; but to pour our griefs into the bosom of a friend, is but committing to him a pledge above the trust of ordinary men” (*JR* 128). As such, it is incorrect to assume that sentimental epistolarity uses letters between same-sex friends in order to spotlight and adumbrate the text’s real, heterosexual economy of desire. On the contrary, the point of the letters is to sustain the fragments of sentiment from narrative and erotic closure—a challenge that Sterne transforms into a coquettish art in *A Sentimental Journey*.

Julia de Roubigné also takes this challenge to heart. In its determination to open up a ruined space for sentiment in the afterlife of matrimony—a space obscured from public view and utterly devoid of the “sort of happiness” that silences the sentimental narrative—the text goes so far as to insist that the erotics of victimhood and servitude penetrate even the most ideal of marriages. Madame de Roubigné’s letter from beyond the grave constitutes the text’s most explicit articulation of this erotics of enslavement. The contents of her letter offer marriage advice to Julia, advice that metatextually informs all sentimental interactions between masters and slaves, husbands and wives, gentlemen and their menservants, and ladies and their *fille de chambres* in the novel:

Let the pleasing of that one person be a thought never absent from your conduct. . . . This privilege a good-natured man may wave: he will feel it, however, due; and

third persons will have penetration enough to see, and may have malice enough to remark, the want of it in his wife. He must be a husband unworthy of you, who could bear the degradation of suffering this in silence. The idea of power, on either side, should be totally banished from the system: it is not sufficient that the husband should never have occasion to regret the want of it; the wife must so behave, that he may never be conscious of possessing it. . . .

In this, and in every other instance, it must never be forgotten, that the only government allowed on our side, is that of gentleness and attraction; and that its power, like the fabled influence of imaginary beings, must be invisible to be complete. (*JR* 79–81)

Madame de Roubigné's "system" of domestic "government" is keenly attuned to both the public and the private coordinates of modern "power." The fantasy of an absolute difference between genders—the two "sides" of marriage—is something that is to be both disguised *and* desired. The public discourse of sexual equality, often considered one of the central, liberal tendencies of the sentimental romance, is thus shown to be palpably ruined at its private core. "But *misfortune* is not always *misery*," Julia's mother insists at the close of her letter. "Then is the triumph of wedded love!—the tie that binds the happy may be dear; but that which links the unfortunate is tenderness unutterable" (*JR* 81). At the same time that gender differences are publicly "banished," the discourse of sentimental equality *ruins* gender with an invisible, yet devastatingly "complete," private obligation to power.

"I know not if there is really a sex in the soul," ponders Savillon in language that Mackenzie would later borrow for his 1779 essay in the *Mirror*.¹³ "[C]ustom and education," he continues, "have established one in our idea; but we wish to feel the inferiority of the other sex, as one that does not debase, but endear it" (*JR* 113). Even if humans were "really" equal, winks the sentimental romantic, we still desire the luxury of mastery and the polite stigma of "inferiority" it demands. This is why the decaying husks of so many abandoned women, often called Maria, allegorically litter the landscape of sentimental romance. "It is by such private and domestic distresses," notes Mackenzie in another story published in the *Mirror*,

that the softer emotions of the heart are most strongly excited. The fall of more important personages is commonly distant from our observation; . . . [b]ut the death of one, who, like Maria, was to shed the influence of her virtues over the age of a father, and the childhood of her sisters, presents to us a little view of family affliction, which every eye can perceive, and every heart can feel. On scenes of public sorrow and national regret, we gaze as upon those gallery pictures which strike us with wonder and admiration; domestic calamity is like the miniature of a friend, which we wear in our bosoms, and keep for secret looks and solitary enjoyment. (*M* 499)

The ruined woman and her fragmented domesticity take center stage in the erotics of “national regret.” This economy of “affliction” does not so much value Maria’s image as it does fetishize “domestic calamity,” the thing of ruin itself. What the sentimental “gaze” desires is not Maria’s subjectivity but her grief, the story of her suffering, the formal incompleteness of her self. Her name, like her subjectivity, is totally insignificant and signals the generalized condition of sentimental ruin rather than any unique human presence. And so in Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* we are not surprised to encounter another iteration of Maria, similarly ruined and, as is often the case with such fragmented subjectivities, hovering on the threshold of sanity as she wanders aimlessly around an idyllic country landscape:

She was dressed in white . . . except that her hair hung loose, which before was twisted within a silk net.—She had, superadded likewise to her jacket, a pale ribbon which fell across her shoulder to the waist; at the end of which hung her pipe.—Her goat had been as faithless as her lover; and she had got a little dog in lieu of him, which she had kept tied by a string to her girdle. . . .

I sat down close by her; and Maria let me wipe [her tears] away as they fell with my handkerchief—I then steeped it in my own—and then in hers—and then in mine—and then I wiped hers again—and as I did it, I felt such undecipherable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion.

I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which materialists have pestered the world ever convince me of the contrary.¹⁴

Sentimental romance ruins, not revives, the aesthetics of pastoralism: it names the textual coproduction of ruin and revival. For it is only in such total fragmentation of domesticity that the voluptuous and ruined materiality of Maria’s tear can appear, a materiality that congeals her unique and private suffering and enables this public spectacle of sentimental exchange to take place. Sterne’s romance of the tear, like Mackenzie’s sentimental shilling, brings forward the thinghood of the ruined body—the wetness of its tears and the technical process of their absorption into Yorick’s handkerchief—at the same time that it presents this exchange as firm evidence for an antimaterialist, sentimental “soul” that transcends private differences. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her own fragmented and unfinished novel, *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1794), will later revisit such sentimental exchanges from the viewpoint of the ruined female body. For, as Madame de Roubigné’s “system” of domestic “government” reminds us, the equality of the sexes hinted at in these public spectacles of sympathy and charity is tied to the privilege of private ruin, the endearing and utterly material stain of suffering that haunts the afterlife of sentimental equality. And so when Julia confronts the ruin of

her love for Savillon, her “tears fell without control, and almost without distress” (*JR* 132). This perfect sentimental tear so completely publicizes and materializes the private affective core of the sentimental subject that it treats both subjectivity and sentimentality—emotional “distress”—as entirely irrelevant factors in sentimental exchange.

The Dialectics of Amorous Bondage¹⁵

The concept of a community united by universal, public sympathies and a common sentimental currency appears to level differences between human subjects. We have seen how, in order to avoid the corruption of the public exchange, the economy of sentimental romance only values and circulates the always-ruined fragments of private feeling. However, as Julia’s hyperemotional tear demonstrates, these fragmented and non-valuable affective tokens are no strangers to the logic of the commodity. If these tokens are to act as currency within the sentimental community, then they must be quantifiable: we must be able to possess them to greater or lesser degrees. Instead of democratically leveling differences between people, the sentimental romance singles out and privileges specific moments of exceptional suffering, congealing personal pain into a public token—a thing of ruined feeling. The point to be emphasized here is that these exceptional things of singular difference and unutterable private ruin help to *found* the conceptual equalities paraded by modern discourses of liberalism and sentimental democracy. The fact of servitude and the stigma of private difference are not simply excluded from the communities that are imagined by such concepts: they are not other, competing concepts that have been expelled from the sentimental community. On the contrary, and as both Giorgio Agamben and Madame de Roubigné would be quick to point out, it is the *creation* of these unutterable stains of private difference that enables the concept and the economy of public equality to emerge and sustain itself with such invisible and complete force.¹⁶

At stake here is the proper relationship between sentiment and servitude, romance and race. In *The Politics of Sensibility*, Markman Ellis points out that the literature of sentimentality is drawn to overtly political themes such as the slave trade and racial discrimination, arguing that this attraction stems from the “asymmetrical power relation essential to slavery”—a fact that the sentimental romance uses to exploit “the scopic possibilities of violence and inequality inherent to the chattel slave economy, and the ambiguous, mute docility of the slave subject.”¹⁷ Read from such a perspective, the horror of the transatlantic slave trade thus becomes a “scopic” scene that the sentimental novel is drawn to, a rich symbolic repository

that the text can plunder in order to engage its sympathetic, generic interests. But servitude names much more than a theme, a symbolic value, that economies of affection manipulate in order to assert their politically progressive agendas. As David Kazanjian has recently demonstrated, the tendency to separate enlightened discourses of democracy and equality from the premodern evils of racism and slavery ignores the ideological fact of their mutual *coproduction*. “[C]apacious practices of freedom,” he argues, “were increasingly restricted to a formal equality fleshed out by precise—if unstable—racial, national, and gendered materialities.”¹⁸ Sentimental romance, driven by its “capacious” vision of a community united by shared sympathies and feelings, similarly fleshes out a precise, private space ruined by inequality and stained with unutterable suffering. This desire to produce, as well as to publicly banish, material differences between people transforms servitude from a sentimental theme into a formal aesthetic principle. And it is this aesthetics of ruin, rather than the scopic symbolism of slavery, that is responsible for the deepest structural link between romance and race, sentimentality and servitude.

When Savillon decides to save Julia and her family from financial ruin, he immediately leaves for his uncle’s slave plantation in Martinique. Upon arrival, Savillon is appalled by the “treatment of the negroes,” and the letters he sends to Beauvaris, his most intimate confidante, speak with sentimental vigor “of the many thousands of my fellow-creatures groaning under servitude and misery” (*JR* 101). It is this humanitarian thread of the narrative that attracts the attention of Ellis, lending support to his reading of *Julia de Roubigné* as a text that draws on African slavery as a powerful thematic context. Susan Manning goes so far as to argue, in a footnote to her 1999 edition of the text, that “Savillon’s (and Mackenzie’s) abolitionist views are far ahead of general opinion” (*JR* 97). To be sure, Savillon’s letters point out the horrific evils of slavery, but it is important to remember that these comments only appear after he has relayed to Beauvaris his experiment with “a different mode of government in one plantation.” Most of the slaves, Savillon observes, “neglect their work altogether; but this only served to convince me, that my plan was a good one, and that I should undoubtedly profit, if I could establish some other motive, whose impulse was more steady than those of punishment and terror” (*JR* 97). Savillon’s “project” is, from the outset, presented as an economic experiment designed to increase the profitability of plantation labor. The issue that drives his Martinican adventures is never the *abolition* of “punishment and terror”; on the contrary, in searching for a coercive power, an “impulse more steady” than spectacular, raw violence, his letters continue to develop the central aesthetic and thematic concerns of the sentimental romance: how can the obligation and the stain of servitude penetrate the modern subject completely and invisibly? And how can

this fact of private ruin be transformed into a profitable and an erotic economy of desire?

“One slave in particular,” Savillon continues, “was worth less money than almost any other in my uncle’s possession. I answered him . . . that I hoped to improve his price some hundreds of livres” (*JR* 97–8). What follows in these letters is an astonishing account of Savillon’s conversation with this slave, Yambu, who turns out to be a “prince” and “master of all” the other slaves on this plantation (*JR* 98). Notice how, in the extended dialogue that follows, the erotics and economics of sentimental power permeate the interaction between master and slave. Rather than dissipating and transcending this dialectic of power, Savillon instead transforms his lordship into a more subtle, more complete, and, he will argue, a more profitable impulse with which to control African bodies:

I took his hand; he considered this a prologue to chastisement, and turned his back to receive the lashes he supposed me ready to inflict. “I wish to be the friend of Yambu,” said I. He made me no answer: I let go his hand, and he suffered it to drop to its former posture. . . . “Can you speak my language, or shall I call for some of your friends, who can explain what you would say to me?” “I speak no say to you,” he replied in his broken French. . . .

“Would you now go to work,” said I, “if you were at liberty to avoid it?” “You make go for whip, and no man love go.”—“I will go along with you, though I am not obliged; for I chuse to work sometimes rather than be idle.”—“Chuse work, no work at all,” said Yambu.—’Twas the very principle on which my system was founded. (*JR* 98–99)

And in a moment of perverse abolitionism, Savillon decides that the best way to put his “system” into effect is to “free” Yambu:

“[F]rom this moment, you are mine no more!” . . . “You would not,” said I, “make your people work by the whip, as you see your overseers do?”—“Oh! no, no whip!”—“Yet they must work, else we shall have no sugars to buy them meat and clothing with.”—(He put his hand to his brow, as if I had started a difficulty he was unable to overcome.)—“Then you shall have the command of them, and they shall work chuse work for Yambu.” . . . “Your master,” said I, “is now free, and may leave you when he pleases!”

. . . [I] told [the other slaves] that, while they continued in the plantation, Yambu was to superintend their work; that if they chose to leave him and me, they were at liberty to go; and that, if found idle or unworthy, they should not be allowed to stay. . . . I have had the satisfaction of observing those men, under the feeling of good treatment, and the idea of liberty, do more than almost double their number subject to the whip of an overseer. I am under no apprehension of desertion or mutiny; they work with the willingness of freedom, yet are mine with more than the obligation of slavery. (*JR* 99–100)

The point is not that Savillon, and by extension Mackenzie, is either a proslavery apologist or an early abolitionist. On the contrary, the text parades a putative choice between distinct public values (“the willingness of freedom” and the “whip” of slavery) at the same time that it produces an invisible private “obligation” more massive than even the most spectacular system of discipline and punishment. In the afterlife of sentimental equality, Yambu retains an essential difference (as “master” to “those men” whose work he superintends) at the same time that he receives “the idea of liberty.” “Speak no say” and “work chuse work”: Yambu’s language fully registers the paradox of a speaking subject who is at once free and enslaved, a subjectivity shaped by a living death shared by all the sentimental victims of the novel.

And so too when Matthew “Monk” Lewis visits the Jamaican plantations he has inherited in 1816, his own attempts to improve the condition of his slaves amounts to installing a better regulated, more humane, and more complete system of obligation.¹⁹ There is no more gothic, more completely horrific scene in all of Lewis’s scandalous fiction than the account in his *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* of the imagined liberation of one of his slaves. “As I took no notice of him,” Lewis recalls,

he at length ventured to introduce himself by saying, “Massa not know me: *me your slave*.”—and really the sounds made me feel a pang at heart. The lad appeared all gaiety and good humour . . . but the word “slave” seemed to imply that, although he did feel pleasure then in serving me, if he had detested me he must have served me still. I really felt quite humiliated at the moment, and was tempted to tell him, “Do not say that again: say that you are my negro, but do not call yourself my slave.”²⁰

What Lewis can only dream of saying to his slave in Jamaica, Savillon vocalizes clearly in Martinique: “say that you are my negro”; you are “mine with more than the obligation of slavery.”

While the symbolic opposition between freedom and servitude seems to hold the slave clearly and visibly in his place, separated only by the “whip of an overseer,” how are we to articulate the invisible stain, the “mine” of obligation that remains after his manumission? In the same way that servitude is not simply another theme or a different concept that the sentimental romance engages, so too Lewis’s “negro” is not just the white man’s public Other: along with Yambu and the many sentimental Marias, he is also marked by an invisible yet complete private obligation, a living death always excluded from political community and totally obscured from public view. What is so devastating and novel about the topography of this racialized space of personal ruin is not its thematic or conceptual distance from the ideals of affective and democratic equal-

ity. On the contrary, Mackenzie's work demonstrates the secret alliance between the sentimental freedoms of the man of feeling and the unutterable obligations of servitude—the mutuality and interdependence that, like the twin images of the Rubin vase, provides the illusion of two distinct concepts or values. The thing of racialized, private ruin forms an inseparable bond with these expansive freedoms, connected by an intimate dialectic of appearance and occlusion that does not so much exclude its stain of singular difference as it does *include* it invisibly and completely within the modern sentimental and political community.

Writing less than a decade after Mackenzie completes *Julia de Roubigné*, another famous man of feeling—beguiled by the sensibilities of Ossian, his favorite poet—articulates his own system of sentimental “government”:

Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?²¹

Thomas Jefferson's romance of race synthesizes the Enlightenment's thirst for taxonomic precision with the man of feeling's dream for a flawlessly unmediated blush or tear. Sharing the same grammatical structure that patterns Shaftesbury's *Sensus Communis* with such precautious certitude, Jefferson's theory of sentimental community is framed by a series of questions that promise the scientific resolution of the adverb clause (“Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane”) only to deliver self-evident redundancy (even if we have no idea as to its “seat and cause,” the blackness of the negro must be “fixed in nature”). The invisibility of the stain's mechanism only adds to its material force: blackness is not just a coloring of the skin, it is the “immovable veil” of ruin at the heart of sentimental registration, the “eternal” occlusion of feeling's desire to publicize itself. Jefferson's genius is to build a romance of race rooted in the aesthetics of sentimental romance and its obscured thing of ruined feeling.

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NOTES

1 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *The Process of Production of Capital* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 205 (hereafter cited as *C*).

2 In *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992), Ann Cvetkovich reads *Capital* as a "sensation narrative," arguing that Marx deploys the tropes of sentimental fiction in order to humanize the worker and to spotlight the exploitation of his body.

3 Perhaps this is why Marx was so enamored with the literature of romance, a fact that is relayed with obvious delight by his daughter, Eleanor:

And [he] would also read to his children. Thus to me, as to my sisters before me, he read the whole of Homer, the whole *Nibelungen Lied*, *Gudrun*, *Don Quixote*, the *Arabian Nights*, etc. . . . Scott was an author to whom Marx again and again returned, whom he admired and knew as well as he did Balzac and Fielding. And while he talked about these and many other books he would . . . show his little girl where to look for all that was finest and best in the works, teach her—though she never thought she was being taught, to that she would have objected—to try and think, to try and understand for herself.

See "Recollections of Mohr," in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stephen Morawski, (New York: International Publishers, 1974), 150.

4 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1969), 59

5 Fredric Jameson, "Magic Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (1975): 142.

6 Shaftesbury, 7th Earl of (Anthony Ashley Cooper), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

7 Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 18 (hereafter cited as *MF*).

8 Mackenzie, "Papers from the *Mirror*," in *The Miscellaneous Works of Henry Mackenzie, Esq.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 498 (hereafter cited as *M*).

9 William Godwin, *Fleetwood: or, the New Man of Feeling* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), 56.

10 For a fascinating discussion of the it-narrative, see Jonathan Lamb "Modern Metamorphoses and Disgraceful Tales," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 133–66.

11 Mackenzie, *Julia de Roubigné*, ed. Susan Manning (East Linton, SCT: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 116 (hereafter cited as *JR*).

12 Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 84.

13 In a footnote to page 113 of *Julia de Roubigné*, Manning observes that "Mackenzie's essay for *The Mirror*, no. 30 (May 8, 1779), raises the same question, and treats it as indisputable that 'whether or not there be a sex in the soul . . . there is one in manners'" (*JR* 113). Similar language is also present in the *Lounger*, no. 32 (September 10, 1785): "'There is something . . . in the circumstance of sex, that mixes a degree of tenderness with our duty to a female.'" In Mackenzie, *Miscellaneous Works*, 114.

14 Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 138.

15 My discussion of sentimental servitude is influenced by Colin Dayan's "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," *American Literature* 66, no. 2 (1994): 239–73.

16 See Giorgio Agamben, "The Logic of Sovereignty," in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 15–29.

17 Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Commerce, and Gender in the Sentimental Novel* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 55.

18 David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press), 7.

19 See also Maja-Lisa von Sneidern, "Monk Lewis's Journals and the Discipline of Discourse," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 23 (2001): 59–68

20 Matthew Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 62.

21 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 264–65.