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An Aesthetics of Vulnerability: The Sentimentum and the Novels of Graham Swift

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Since the advent of modernism, sentimentality has increasingly fallen from grace as a tenable mode of expression in literary fiction. Originally valued highly, sentimentality has come to be associated with an unrefined sense of taste and with bad faith. In the case of postmodernist fiction, the critical reception of that fiction would have us believe, sentimentality has been finally eclipsed, together with most other modes of affect. Indeed, Fredric Jameson has argued that postmodernism is constituted by “the waning of affect”.

A number of novels by postmodern authors, however, wed sentimentality as well as other modes of affect with a decidedly postmodernist aesthetics. In my thesis, I investigate what shape sentimentality may assume, and in what kinds of configurations it may be found, in postmodernist fiction. In the novels I consider, sentimentality is expressed through postmodernist techniques such as double-coding and reflexivity. Moreover, the novels engage a postmodern ethico-spiritual thinking about alterity. As a shorthand for the shape sentimentality assumes through a combination of postmodernist aesthetics and ethico-spiritual thinking, I introduce the neologism “the sentimentum”.

In my investigation, I focus on the novels of the British author, Graham Swift, as these strike me as exemplary for my investigation. However, the ambitions of my thesis are both larger and more general: I am seeking to alter definitions of postmodernist fiction as well as the terms of its theorization.

My study thus proceeds from an introduction that offers a brief survey of the critical discourses on, first, postmodernist fiction in general, and second, the fiction of Swift in particular. In the first chapter I present some theories and notions of postmodernism and subject them to a critique, and then move on to elaborate and define the concept of the sentimentum. Chapters two through four present illustrative readings of Swift’s six novels to date. Throughout his *oeuvre*, I argue, Swift approaches a more affirmative vision of a postmodern sentimentality. Thus, Swift’s narratives become gradually more ‘vulnerable’, as they display sentimental and romantic notions without qualifying and undermining them.

In my conclusion, I consider a more general movement toward an aesthetics of vulnerability in postmodernist fiction. I discuss novels by Julian Barnes, Penelope Lively, and Jeanette Winterson in order to show the wider applications of the concept of the sentimentum.

Key words: English-twentieth-century-literature, postmodernist-fiction, postmodernism, sentimentality, sensibility, affect, emotion, love, ethics, spirituality, the-sentimentum, Swift-Graham, Barnes-Julian, Lively-Penelope, Winterson-Jeanette.