

ENTHUSIASM DELINEATED: WEEPING AS A RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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*Eighteenth-century Europe and its renowned cult of sensibility have a special place in the history of tears. This article revisits weeping in eighteenth-century Britain, seeking especially to recover the religious practices, texts, and ideas involved in the production and interpretation of tears. Some of the most prolific and public weeping of the period was produced by the Methodist revival, and especially the preaching of the "Weeping Prophet", George Whitefield. A different, more melancholy form of enthusiasm was the keynote of Henry Mackenzie's famously lachrymose novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771), reinterpreted here as a handbook of Christian sensibility and religious weeping. On both sides of the French Revolution debate in Britain in the 1790s, tears were shed, but were also denounced. The retrospective belief that tearful sensibilities had given rise to dangerous ideologies and bloody violence cast the practice of weeping in a new light. Suspicions of religious "enthusiasm" from earlier periods were now applied to revolutionary sympathisers in Britain, and commentators, including Helen Maria Williams, began to discuss the idea that it was un-English to weep.*

Previous scholarly discussions of the meanings of tears in the notoriously lachrymose eighteenth century have explained them with reference to the production and consumption of sentimental novels, plays, and paintings;¹ to the famed

¹ Anne Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Ildiko Csengei, "'I Will Not Weep': Reading through the Tears of Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*," *Modern Language Review*, 103 (2008): 952-68; Emma Barker, "Reading the *Greuze Girl*: The Daughter's Seduction," *Representations*, 117.1 (2012): 86-119; Brett D. Wilson, "Bevil's Eyes: Or, How Crying at *The Conscious Lovers* Could Save Britain," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45 (2012): 497-518.

“culture of sensibility;”² and to changing enlightenment ideas about gender and manliness.³ These investigations have documented the fashion for tears in art and literature, the interest in sympathy and moral sentiments among enlightenment philosophers, especially David Hume and Adam Smith, and the cultural turn away from sensibility at the end of the century. In the present article I wish to build on these insights by attempting something slightly different. I do not aim primarily to shed light on the histories of sensibility or sentimentality or emotion or gender, through the example of eighteenth-century tears. Rather, and more simply, I wish to make an investigation directly into the history of tears themselves as secretions, as signs, and as aspects of certain social activities. In other words I seek to start, as much as possible, with an open mind about what other places, practices, texts, and ideas tears might lead us towards and to ask simply when, where, and why they were shed, and how they were interpreted and evaluated at the time.⁴

Adopting this historical approach leads to a picture which differs in a few respects from existing accounts of eighteenth-century weeping. First, the history offered here is couched, for the most part, in language available to and used by historical actors at the time. I have taken care not to explain eighteenth-century tears using modern psychological categories, alien to the eighteenth century, such as “affectivity” or “emotional response,” nor to treat weeping, as would become standard after Charles Darwin’s book on the subject in 1872, as one of

² Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986); John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Philip Carter, “Tears and the Man,” *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, eds. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 156-73; Jennifer C. Vaught, *Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Bernard Capp, “‘Jesus Wept’ But Did the Englishman? Masculinity and the Display of Emotion in Early Modern England,” forthcoming.

⁴ I have attempted something similar for the Victorian period in Thomas Dixon, “The Tears of Mr Justice Willes,” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012): 1-23, and will do so for a longer period, from the late medieval period onwards, in a forthcoming book: *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears*.

“the expressions of the emotions.”⁵ When eighteenth-century people reflected on the causes and meanings of tears, they thought of them as effects, marks, signs, or testimony of passions, affections, or feelings, as well as of thoughts, considerations, and ideas. Tears were not taken as evidence that a person was “emotional,” a word that did not enter the English language until the 1830s. In the language of the eighteenth-century figures discussed below, tears could be signs of “tender passions,” of “sympathy,” or the “softest sentiments of humanity;” of “awful adoration” or “lively faith;” of “fervour” or “affection;” of “instinctive tenderness” or “melancholy enthusiasm.” And, when we do read about “emotions” of the body, mind, heart, or soul in eighteenth-century texts, we need to be aware that these emotions are not “the emotions” of post-Darwinian psychology. Rather they are movements, agitations, or convulsions with no special technical or theoretical import.⁶

While aiming to frame eighteenth-century tears within a picture that goes beyond stereotypical assumptions about sensibility, sentiment, or emotion, I bring to the material my own set of questions and interpretations. One of the historical questions about tears that especially interests me and which I address directly at the end of this article, concerns the association between weeping and national identity. During the twentieth century it became common to attribute a stiff upper lip and inactive lachrymal glands to the British nation as a whole, but such a notion clearly did not prevail during the eighteenth century, and it is instructive to ask when and why it did emerge. Finally, I bring to this research a suspicion that previous studies of tears, weeping, and sensibility have underplayed the role of Christian texts, ideas, and practices in producing and interpreting tears. It would be unusual to write a study of eighteenth-century sensibility that made no reference to the philosophies of Hume and Smith. However, it is not uncommon to find in such studies an assumption that almost nothing needs to be known of Christian religion in order to understand the phenomenon.⁷ One study of the culture of sensibility explains it as the product of a “popular demand for a new set of ideas with which to account for human nature and order society, beyond the explanations

⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Murray, 1872).

⁶ On the history of the categories of “passion,” “affection,” “sentiment” and “emotion” in texts of the period, see Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially chapters 3 and 4, and Thomas Dixon, “‘Emotion’: The History of a Keyword in Crisis,” *Emotion Review*, 4 (2012), forthcoming.

⁷ Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, for instance, reconstructs “Anglo-American emotion” in the period with no reference to Christianity, Methodism, the Bible, or religious revivals.

given by Christian dogma.”⁸ The important roles played by preachers, clergymen and Christian philosophers in constructing the culture of sensibility including the lachrymose figure of the “man of feeling” has, nonetheless, been demonstrated repeatedly by scholars from R. S. Crane in the 1930s to G.J. Barker-Benfield and Jeremy Gregory in the 1990s, and others more recently.⁹ The present article aims to do for weeping what these scholars have done for sensibility, namely to reconstruct the religious contexts that made it possible and meaningful. Recognising the extent to which weeping was understood as a Christian activity, indeed a biblical activity, throughout the eighteenth century, helps to reinforce this broader point about the close connections between sensibility and religion. Accordingly, it is with the Methodist revival that my short history of weeping will begin, before arriving, via Newgate, William Hogarth, and Henry Mackenzie, at Mary Wollstonecraft, the French Revolution, and the British revolt against tears.

Methodist Enthusiasm

Simply setting oneself the task of identifying the most prolific and visible weepers of the eighteenth century, it is hard to find any better candidates than the participants in the Methodist revival that began in the late 1730s. In the context of that movement, copious tears were something more than characteristic; they were obligatory, ubiquitous. Methodists wept actively and often: as they prayed, wrestling with God and their own souls; as they preached, enacting and eliciting penitence for sin; and as they listened, in shame or in love and joy.

In 1745, Sampson Staniforth, a twenty-five year-old soldier from Yorkshire, was stationed in Ghent during the War of the Austrian Succession. It was the middle of the night and he was standing sentinel at a dangerous post. He was in a state of spiritual agitation:

- ⁸ Todd 3; although the same work does go on to give a brief explanation of the roots of the culture of sensibility in seventeenth-century religious philosophy (21-23).
- ⁹ R.S. Crane, “Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling,’” *ELH*, 1 (1934): 205-30; Donald Greene, “Latitudinarianism and Sensibility: The Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling’ Reconsidered,” *Modern Philology*, 75 (1977): 159-83; Frans De Bruyn, “Latitudinarianism and its Importance as a Precursor to Sensibility,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 80 (1981): 349-68; Barker-Benfield 65-77; Jeremy Gregory, “*Homo Religiosus*: Masculinity and Religion in the Long Eighteenth Century,” *English Masculinities 1660-1800*, eds. Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen (London: Longman, 1999) 85-110; Goring, *Rhetoric of Sensibility* 70-90; William Van Reyk, “Christian Ideals of Manliness in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009): 1053-73.

As soon as I was alone, I kneeled down, and determined not to rise, but to continue crying and wrestling with God, till He had mercy on me. How long I was in that agony I cannot tell, but as I looked up to heaven I saw Jesus hanging on the cross. At the same moment these words were applied to my heart, "thy sins are forgiven thee." My chains fell off; my heart was free. All guilt was gone, and my soul was filled with unutterable peace.¹⁰

Thousands of other converts had similar and similarly tearful religious experiences during this period, especially those who had come under the influence of George Whitefield, whose virtuosic weeping as a preacher, on both sides of the Atlantic, earned him the soubriquet "The Weeping Prophet." Whitefield's sermons elicited copious tears not only from the thousands of working men and women who heard him preach, but also from himself. A contemporary observer wrote: "I hardly ever knew him go through a sermon without weeping, more or less, and I truly believe his were the tears of sincerity. His voice was often interrupted by his affection." The same witness continued: "I could hardly bear such unreserved use of tears, and the scope he gave to his feelings, for sometimes he exceedingly wept, stamped loudly and passionately, and was frequently so overcome, that for a few seconds, you would suspect he never could recover."¹¹ On one occasion at the start of his career, as a young man in his twenties, Whitefield embarked on a series of outdoor sermons to coal miners at Kingswood near Bristol. Contemporary estimates put the size of the crowds at up to twenty thousand.¹² Whitefield wrote of the congregation in his notebook that "The first discovery of their being affected, was, to see the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits."¹³

Whitefield's was exemplary weeping. On hillsides, in fields, his open-air sermons showed others how to weep, and gave them opportunities to do so. Whitefield observed and commented upon the tears of his hearers, or lack of them, and connected them to biblical stories and to an over-arching narrative of sin,

¹⁰ Quoted in D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "'My Chains Fell Off, My Heart Was Free': Early Methodist Conversion Narrative in England," *Church History*, 68 (1999): 910.

¹¹ William Jay, *Memoirs of the Life and Character of the Late Rev. Cornelius Winter*, 2nd ed. (London: Williams and Smith, 1809) 27-28. See also Rev. J.B. Wakeley, *Anecdotes of the Rev. George Whitefield* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1872) 23-24.

¹² Sydney G. Dimond, *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival: An Empirical and Descriptive Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926) 108.

¹³ John Gillies, *Memoirs of the Rev. George Whitefield* (Middletown, CT: Hunt and Noyes, 1839) 39.

fall, and redemption. The tears that Whitefield shed and elicited were sometimes tears of lamentation in the tradition of the Psalms, Jeremiah and other “Weeping Prophets;” sometimes tears of love and joy at the good news of Christian salvation. During a sermon, preached in a field, in which Whitefield retold the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac with huge pathos, he told his hearers, “I see your hearts affected. I see your eyes weep.” On another occasion he told the congregation: “Your tears and deep attention are an evidence, that the Lord God is amongst us of a truth.”¹⁴ These tears in Whitefield’s hearers were, for him, the outward and visible signs of the inward and invisible workings of God on the hearts of men and women.

The spiritual autobiographies of other early Methodist preachers were, like some sentimental fiction, disconnected, episodic and endlessly tearful. The weeping here was part of a violent struggle, with eternal damnation or salvation as its outcome, of a kind that had recognisable roots in seventeenth-century Puritanism, as has been shown by Bernard Capp.¹⁵ The memoir of John Haime, who fought in the British army in Flanders in the 1740s, fluctuates between extremes of despair at his own sinfulness, accompanied by bitter cries and tears, and moments of divine relief, also marked by tears, but now of love and ecstasy. Haime’s memoir narrates the exertions of a being inhabiting a near-Manichean world of darkness and light, sinful lewdness and blessed salvation; the latter conceived as a blissful but temporary release from hellish, worldly agony. In this picture, religious weeping was an intensely physical activity. On one occasion, seeking mercy from God in a church, Haime wrote: “I fell down before the Lord, with bitter cries and tears, till my strength failed me, and it was with difficulty I could walk out of the room.” A turning point for Haime came on 22 April 1743. He recalled that on that day: “I prayed earnestly to God that he would smite the rock, and cause the waters to flow. He answered my prayer. My head was as waters, and my eyes as a fountain of tears. I wept, I sang.” But three years later, Haime again fell into despair; and again the signs were intensely physical. Possessed by pride, anger, self-will “and every other devilish temper,” Haime walked, tormented through the countryside, weeping bitterly, “howling, like a wild beast, so that the woods resounded;” he partly lost his sight, and felt as if he were on fire.¹⁶

¹⁴ George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1772) 5:47, 371.

¹⁵ Capp, “‘Jesus Wept’ But Did the Englishman?”

¹⁶ John Haime, “The Life of Mr John Haime,” *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers, Chiefly Written by Themselves*, 6 vols., ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865) 1:275-78, 293-94.

So, the leaders and participants in eighteenth-century Methodism wept frequently and violently, also sighing, trembling, shouting, falling down, and rolling around. When John Wesley preached in York in May 1753, on the text "Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need," one of those present recorded: "I never saw a congregation so affected. Most of the people were in tears, some for joy, some from a sense of their sins."¹⁷

Perhaps the only published genre that could rival either Methodist memoirs or sentimental novels for unremitting tearfulness was *The Ordinary of Newgate's Accounts*. These popular publications were moralistic potted biographies of criminals executed at Tyburn, penned by successive prison chaplains at Newgate between the 1670s and the 1760s.¹⁸ The courtroom and the scaffold had both long provided opportunities for tears to be shed by prisoners, advocates, judges, and onlookers. On one particularly dramatic occasion, after the failed Jacobite rising of 1745, even the executioner wept bitterly, asking for forgiveness, before decapitating the rebel Earl of Kilmarnock, whose gentlemanly and Christian demeanour "drew Tears from thousands of the Spectators."¹⁹ The tears in the Newgate narratives, published by the chaplains as a profitable sideline to their official duties, fell into three categories: tears shed by convicts in fear of their death; tears of true penitence shed by condemned criminals as signs of a contrite heart, often accompanying a final confession of guilt; and tears of pity wept by those who witnessed the criminals' final moments. Only the first category were met with a measure of disapproval, and all these tears were interpreted within a Christian framework of sin, penitence and the hope for divine forgiveness.

The prison chaplains who wrote the accounts saw tears as an important sign of contrition, but also emphasised that tears and sighing alone were not enough. Something deeper was required: a true spiritual conversion. So, for instance, one chaplain in 1685 warned convicts who wept and seemed penitent that "the Heart of man was very deceitful, and that they were not to rest in, much less to trust,

¹⁷ "The Life of Mr Thomas Mitchell," *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, 1:252.

¹⁸ All surviving published accounts are available at the "Old Bailey Online" website: <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Ordinarys-accounts.jsp>.

¹⁹ As reported in *The General Advertiser*, 19 August 1746. See also James Foster, *An Account of the Behaviour of the Late Earl of Kilmarnock, After his Sentence, an on the Day of his Execution* (London: J. Noon, 1746) 35; James Montagu, *The Old Bailey Chronicle, Containing a Circumstantial Account of the Lives, Trials, and Confessions of the Most Notorious Offenders*, 4 vols. (London: S. Smith, 1788) 3:5-6; Horace Bleackley, *The Hangmen of England: How They Hanged and Whom They Hanged* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1929) 82-83.

any initial sorrow for Sin" but to seek instead a thorough inward conversion.²⁰ Another, in 1690, made the same point: a man lost in sin "cannot rationally expect that a few Sighs and Tears and the Expiring Breath of a faint *Lord have mercy on me*, should safely waft a false hearted Sinner unto the Haven of Celestial Rest."²¹ These sorts of warnings became less frequent in the eighteenth century, and as tears became a routinely expected part of the convict's final hours, some of the condemned needed reassurance when they found themselves dry-eyed in the final moments. A highwayman called William Piggot, anxious to prove his repentance, told the Ordinary in 1721 that, although he was truly penitent, "it was not easily in his Power to weep, nor had he ever remembered himself to shed a Tear; except once, since he was in the Condemned Hold at the final parting with his little Son."²² In a similar case in the 1750s, the Ordinary commented that a lack of tears did not prove a want of penitence, and could mean the contrary, "for tears are often indications only of passion, while true sorrow is chiefly felt at the heart; and is rather the parent of silence, than of tumultuous exclamations and wailings."²³

For the most part, however, tears were produced as expected and desired, and both Methodist and more moderate forms of weeping left their mark in these records. In 1742, a thirty year old London labourer, Michael Grant, convicted for murdering his common-law wife, whom he had described as "an old street-walker," was sent a devotional poem by a follower of George Whitefield, which included the couplet, "God is Love, I know, I feel/ Jesus Weeps, but Loves me still," and exhorted the reader to "Weep, Believe, and Sin no more." Although the Ordinary noted that the recipient of the poem, Grant, was of generally sullen and morose demeanour, he was, at the end, deeply affected and penitent, and asserted his faith in Christ.²⁴ On 28 April 1760, Robert Tilling, a twenty-three year-old domestic servant from the North East of England was hanged for robbing his master. Tilling was visited by Methodists in the days before his execution, one of whom subsequently preached and published a sermon on the "remarkable conversion" of Tilling to Methodism. He reported that he had found Tilling "in a very spiritual and sweet Frame; quite broken in Spirit and

²⁰ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 1 August 2012), *Ordinary of Newgate's Account*, 10th June 1685 (OA16850610). Further references to the *Ordinary of Newgate's Accounts* are to this same online publication of the texts, and are identified only by their date.

²¹ 13th June 1690.

²² 8th February 1721.

²³ 4th February 1754.

²⁴ 12th July 1742.

melted into Tears” while meditating on the words of John’s gospel.²⁵ The Ordinary’s account of Tilling’s execution ends by noting, with a touch of disapproval, that immediately before he was hanged, Tilling, now behaving as a true Methodist, “prayed in the hearing of the people with a loud voice for about twenty minutes,” telling his listeners:

Beloved friends! O! now look and learn by one who has forgot his God. Temptations prevailed over me; I have fallen by my iniquities, and transgressed the law of my Maker. But thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift! O! that you would attend to one who is now within a hand’s breadth of death. My dear brethren, I could weep over you with a flood of tears, as our Lord wept over Jerusalem, “Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die, O house of Israel!”²⁶

Old Testament texts such as these, in which the prophets and Psalmist wept over the sinfulness of their generation were, as we have seen, popular with Methodists, including the much-quoted phrase from the book of Jeremiah (9:1), “My head was as waters, and my eyes as a fountain of tears.” The Newgate Ordinary had invoked the tears of David too, in 1679, noting that although David had been a “mighty man of War” he had yet “humbled himself and wept for sin, counting it no dishonourable imputation of Effeminacy.”²⁷ The public prophetic sobbing of those who followed in this Old Testament tradition of weeping over sin, was treated, in learned and fashionable circles, with hostility and contempt as an uncontrolled and dangerous sign of “Enthusiasm.”

One tract against enthusiasm, by Dr John Scott, while acknowledging that “excellent use” could be made of the “sensitive passions” within religion, warned that enthusiasts such as the Methodists were raising the passions into a position of unwarranted pre-eminence. Some truly pious individuals were unable, Scott argued, to raise their “blood and sprits” into the “enravishing emotions of sensitive love,” while, on the other hand, there were many “gross hypocrites” at large who “can pour out their confessions in floods of tears, and cause their hearts to dilate with raptures of sensitive love,” despite having “not one dram of true piety in them.” This was merely a fact about the “different tempers of men’s

²⁵ John Stevens, *Christ Made Sin for His People, and They Made the Righteousness of God in Him: Explained in a Sermon Occasioned by the Remarkable Conversion and Repentance of Robert Tilling* (London: George Keith, 1760) 30-31.

²⁶ 28th April 1760; the biblical quotation is from Ezekiel 33:11 (King James Version).

²⁷ 9th May 1679.

bodies” and hence tears were not a facet of religion that should be elevated to a place of significance.²⁸

The same attitude was conveyed by William Hogarth’s unpublished image “Enthusiasm Delineated,” and the later, published version of the same composition, now entitled “Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism: A Medley” (1762). These depictions of overheated preachers and their immoral, hypocritical and delirious congregations, included the weeping figure of George Whitefield in the pulpit. In one version, his closest hearers included a handcuffed, penitent thief whose tears were being bottled by God, evoking a phrase addressed by the Psalmist to God: “Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?”²⁹ Hogarth’s composition sought to associate the allegedly pious tears of enthusiasm with credulity, superstition, fanaticism, and worse (possibly including Roman Catholicism). A barometer in one corner of the image, protruding from an overheated “Methodist’s Brain”, and balanced on top of a volume of Wesley’s sermons, measured the mental temperature of the assembled people, starting at the bottom with despair and suicide, moving up through agony, sorrow, low spirits, and luke-warm love, and finally to lusts, convulsions, and fits of madness. At the very top of the scale is the single word “Raving.” Here, Hogarth was saying, were people weeping like crazy.³⁰

But while the extreme weeping of Whitefield and his ilk could be dismissed by some as a kind of half-mad enthusiasm, that did not mean that other forms of weeping were not encouraged: far from it. The main alternative to the weeping of Methodist enthusiasm was neither dry-eyed indifference, nor a purely secular tear of sympathy, but rather an alternative, gentler form of Christian weeping. This is what is to be found in the sermons and novels of the mid-eighteenth century, including Henry Mackenzie’s *Man of Feeling*, which is the paradigm case. The contrast here is perhaps best envisaged as that between Old Testament and New Testament styles of weeping, rather than between religious enthusiasm on the one hand and a secular form of sentimentality on the other.

²⁸ John Scott, *A Fine Picture of Enthusiasm, Chiefly Drawn by Dr John Scott, wherein the Danger of the Passions Leading in Religion is Strongly Described* (London: J. Noon, 1744) 3-4.

²⁹ Psalm 56:8 (King James Version). Krysmanski speculates that this figure is a representation of the Swiss artist and enameller, Theodore Gardelle, who brutally murdered his landlady and was executed in 1761. Bernd Krysmanski, “We See a Ghost: Hogarth’s Satire on Methodists and Connoisseurs,” *Art Bulletin*, 80 (1998): 300.

³⁰ For further discussions of the two versions of this Hogarth image, see *Memoirs of the Rev. George Whitefield* Krysmanski, “We See a Ghost;” Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation, 1712-1812* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 137-39.

Melancholy Enthusiasm

Several New Testament texts contained memorably lachrymose scenes, most importantly the tears of Jesus in the gospels, lamenting over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and contemplating the grave of Lazarus before raising him (John 11:35). One Benedictine Abbey in France even preserved what they claimed was one of the holy tears shed by Jesus on the latter occasion, although a sceptical pamphlet in 1699 had cast doubt on its authenticity.³¹ Also frequently recalled, in addition to the “*sainte larme*” of Christ himself, were the tears of St Peter, who wept bitterly after denying Christ (Matthew 26:75, Luke 22:62); of the sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus with tears and ointment (Luke 7:38); of Mary Magdalene (often supposed to be the same woman) weeping at the empty tomb (John 20:11-18); and of St Paul’s friends in Ephesus who “all wept sore, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him. Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more” (Acts 20:37-38). These texts provided opportunities for reflection on the religious duty to weep, as well as opportunities for readers and hearers of the texts to emulate them.

The most extended and nuanced discussion of the Christian theology of tears in the mid-eighteenth century is to be found in a 1750 funeral sermon by the independent minister Philip Doddridge, taking “Jesus wept” (John 11:35) as its text and enumerating several possible causes for the saviour’s tears over the grave of Lazarus, as well as drawing moral and practical lessons from them. The first of the causes listed by Doddridge was a general idea of mortality: looking into the grave, Jesus reflected that through original sin all in the world was subject to corruption and decay: “Hither, even to the Darkness, the Abasement, the Putrefaction of *the Grave*, are they all travelling through a Road of Disappointment and Vanity, of Pain and Sorrow.”³² The idea that the very fact and power of death, in the abstract, was a reason for tears was also expressed by Anna Laetitia Barbauld in one of her *Hymns in Prose*:

I have seen man in the pride of his strength; his cheeks glowing with beauty; his limbs were full of activity; he leaped; he walked; he ran; he

³¹ *Memoirs of Literature. Containing a Large Account of Many Valuable Books, Letters, and Dissertations on Several Subjects*, 8 vols., ed. Michel de La Roche, 2nd ed. (London: R. Knaplock and P. Vaillant, 1722) 2:149.

³² Philip Doddridge, *Meditations on the Tears of Jesus over the Grave of Lazarus: A Funeral Sermon Preached at St Alban’s, 16 December 1750, on Occasion of the Much Lamented Death of the Reverend Samuel Clark D.D.* (London: James Waugh, 1751) 9.

rejoiced in that he was more excellent than those. I returned; he lay stiff and cold on the bare ground; his feet could no longer move, nor his hands stretch themselves out; his life was departed from him, and the breath out of his nostrils: therefore do I weep, because death is in the world; the spoiler is among the works of God: all that is made must be destroyed; all that is born must die: let me alone, for I will weep yet longer.³³

In addition to this general intimation of mortal decay, Doddridge added, as causes of Jesus's tears, the thought that before him lay the grave not just of anyone but of a dear friend; this idea in turn brought on thoughts of Lazarus's dying agonies, along with the awareness that others were mourning; and finally Jesus had a premonition, through the destruction of Lazarus, of the destruction of doubters among the Jewish people, and so wept as he had when he lamented prophetically over Jerusalem. It is striking that on Doddridge's account, Jesus's tears sprang forth from a series of "thoughts," "ideas" and "considerations" rather than mere feelings or passions. Accordingly, Doddridge spoke of how Jesus has voluntarily "allowed a Set of Sorrowful Ideas to arise and lodge in his Mind, which he could at pleasure have banished or exchanged: And thus he set himself to practise that Lesson, which he afterwards taught by his Apostle, of *weeping with them that weep*."³⁴ These tears were voluntary, intellectual, and social.

The keynote of Doddridge's sermon was to advocate Christian tenderness and compassion, while decrying Stoical indifference. As Doddridge put it, one could not learn any "Stoical Maxims from the Word of God." For, in the scriptures, "not only the most eminent Saints, but many of the bravest Heroes, are described with the softest Sentiments of Humanity about them, and are frequently painted *in Tears*."³⁵ This message was repeated from pulpits throughout the century. As Vicesimus Knox would later put it, Providence intended the lachrymal glands for use: "Jesus himself wept and thus for ever hallowed the briny fountain. Tears are appropriated to man, as one of the most honourable distinctions which separate him from the brute creation."³⁶ There was even a sermon preached to King George III on the subject, early in his reign in 1762, by William Mason,

³³ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Hymns in Prose for Children*, 6th ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1794) 88.

³⁴ Doddridge 11-12; the final phrase is a quotation from St Paul's letter to the Romans 12:15.

³⁵ Doddridge 14-15; several tearful biblical figures are cited by Doddridge to support his general point, including Abraham, Joseph, David, Jonathan, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, and St Paul.

³⁶ Vicesimus Knox, *Christian Philosophy, or An Attempt to Display the Evidence and Excellence of Revealed Religion*, 2 vols. (London: C. Dilly, 1795) 2:363.

informing the monarch that the “sacred fountains” of Christ’s tears were not of private grief, but “generous, social, sympathetic tears”, displaying his “sympathy with the afflictions of mankind in general.” From Richard Steele’s *Christian Hero* in 1701 to Vicesimus Knox’s writings of the 1780s and 1790s, there was a consensus that Jesus’s tears over the grave of Lazarus were tokens of tenderness and compassion which should be seen as a divine pattern for those who would imitate Christ.³⁷ In other words, you might say, Jesus of Nazareth was the original “man of feeling.”³⁸

Modern commentators are often moved to remark how laughable and absurd Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling*, first published in 1771, seems to a modern reader, especially because of the lachrymosity of the central character, Harley. Many examples could be given, but one of the most famous is a chapter which concludes: “The girl cried afresh: Harley kissed off her tears as they flowed, and wept between every kiss.”³⁹ One early twentieth-century writer, using the categories of modern psychology to seek to recapture this sentimental moment, wrote that her own “less emotional age” could not possibly comprehend the “gymnastic of the emotions” apparently implied by this sentence from Mackenzie’s novel.⁴⁰ A late-Victorian edition of the novel had included a satirical “Index to Tears (Chokings, etc., not counted),” which ran to forty-seven cases, inviting readers to laugh rather than cry over the book. Although, it should be added, that the publishers of that 1886 edition included in the end papers an advertisement for cambric handkerchiefs, just in case.⁴¹ Even some of the novel’s original readers, by the ends of their lives, found that *The Man of Feeling* produced indifference or amusement, where once it had moved them to exquisite and tearful moral raptures. Louisa Stuart wrote to Walter Scott about this phenomenon in 1826, wondering how such rapid changes in taste and aesthetic response could be

³⁷ Richard Steele, *The Christian Hero: An Argument Proving that No Principles but Those of Religion are Sufficient to Make a Great Man* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1701) 80-82; Vicesimus Knox, *Winter Evenings: Or, Lucubrations on Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (London: J. Richardson and Co., 1790) 2:179-85. See also Jacob Dalton, *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. P. Simson, Preached at the Meeting-House in Vicar-Lane, Coventry, July 18, 1773* (Coventry: J.W. Piercy, 1773); Caleb Evans, *The Tears of Christian Friendship* (Bristol: W. Pine, 1779).

³⁸ Carter 164-65 also makes this point; see also works cited in footnote 9 above.

³⁹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Maureen Harkin (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005) 115 (chapter 35).

⁴⁰ Mary Howarth, “Retrospective Review: ‘The Man of Feeling’: A Hero of Old-Fashioned Romance,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* (January-June 1907): 294; see also Todd 1-3.

⁴¹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Henry Morley (London: Cassell & Co., 1886).

explained.⁴² Scott replied that such changes occurred “insensibly,” but that when a fashion had become widely accepted it quickly fell into discredit.⁴³

What more can we add to Scott’s reply to Stuart, two centuries on? What can help us reimagine the cultural world within which an earlier reviewer of *The Man of Feeling* could declare that any reader “who weeps not over some of the scenes it describes, has no sensibility of mind” and explain how that world was superseded by others?⁴⁴ One way to make the novel seem less bizarre to modern eyes is to understand that this was an expression of a Christian faith rooted in biblical narratives, and not just an excessively tear-soaked version of Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiments (as some modern commentators seem to imagine).⁴⁵

It is clear from his notebooks and correspondence that Henry Mackenzie had a sincere Christian commitment and that he subscribed to the ideal of the imitation of Christ, writing in his notebook that: “The Example of our blessed Saviour is the most striking lesson of what genuine Piety & religion make a Man.” This imitation of Christ would produce a “calm, considerate & temperate disposition to which Religion properly entertained gives birth.” Mackenzie also recommended the study of the scriptures, and especially the gospels as:

the most powerful & energetic persuasion to that Piety & Religion, that Submission to God, that love for our Neighbour, that Benevolence of Man, that Charity to all, which a rational & virtuous man would follow for its own sake.⁴⁶

In a letter of condolence to one of his cousins, Mackenzie endorsed the Christian anti-Stoicism that had been rehearsed in so many pulpits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:

⁴² Letter to Walter Scott, 4 September 1826, *The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Wilfred Partington (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930) 272-73; this is discussed by Maureen Harkin, “Introduction,” in her edition of *The Man of Feeling*, 19-20; and by Csengei 952.

⁴³ Letter to Louisa Stuart, 6 September 1826, Walter Scott, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, Volume X: 1826-1828*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson (London: Constable, 1936) 96-97.

⁴⁴ “*The Man of Feeling*,” *Monthly Review*, 44 (May 1771): 418.

⁴⁵ Some other critical readings of the novel have focussed on the Christian imagery of the text, as well as its resignation and pessimism: Robert L. Platzner, “Mackenzie’s Martyr: The Man of Feeling as Sainly Fool,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 10 (1976): 59-64; G.A. Starr, “Aphra Behn and the Genealogy of the Man of Feeling,” *Modern Philology*, 87(1990): 362-72.

⁴⁶ *Literature and Literati: The Literary Correspondence and Notebooks of Henry Mackenzie. Volume 2: Notebooks 1763-1824*, ed. Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999) 208-209.

Religion, ever amiable as it is wise, stifles not those Feelings which the Author of our Nature has implanted in us; Stoicism bids us exchange them for Insensibility; Religion exalts their Use, & dignifies their Exertion.⁴⁷

Mackenzie gave this philosophy of Christian feeling and resignation literary form not only in *The Man of Feeling*, but also in "The Importance of Religion to Minds of Sensibility: The Story of La Roche," published in 1779.⁴⁸

This story suggested the superiority of Christian sensibility over philosophical indifference through a tale of a sceptical philosopher, modelled on David Hume, and his friendship with a country clergyman in Switzerland, La Roche, and his daughter, who dies in tragic circumstances.⁴⁹ The central idea is the contrast between the philosopher, in whose dry and unfeeling mind there is no place for "the finer and more delicate sensibilities," and the Swiss clergyman, whose "religion was that of sentiment, not theory" and for whom the important things in life, including music and religion, are characterised by strong feelings. The tale culminates in a tear-filled sermon preached by La Roche at the funeral of his daughter, in which he states that human wisdom, unlike Christian faith, bestows comfort only by repressing feeling. As the tears flow from the pulpit, La Roche declares "I am not ashamed of my feelings." After the sermon, on meeting again with his friend the sceptical philosopher, the clergyman, in a gesture that echoes the reunion of Joseph with his brothers, "threw his arms round his neck, and watered it with his tears."⁵⁰ The narrator of the tale notes of La Roche: "A philosopher might have called him an enthusiast; but, if he possessed the fervour of enthusiasts, he was guiltless of their bigotry."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Letter to Elizabeth Rose, 21 December 1772, Henry Mackenzie, *Letters to Elizabeth Rose of Kilravock, on Literature, Events and People, 1768-1815*, ed. Horst W. Drescher (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1967) 121-22.

⁴⁸ Henry Mackenzie, "The Effects of Religion on Minds of Sensibility: The Story of La Roche," first published in *The Mirror*, 19 June 1779; included in Appendix C of Mackenzie, *Man of Feeling*, ed. Harkin 179-90.

⁴⁹ One of Mackenzie's notebook entries, recalling showing the story to Adam Smith for his approval, confirms that the character of the sceptical philosopher was deliberately modelled on David Hume; *Literature and Literati* 2:215. Mackenzie was frequently in Hume's company and impressed by his character, noting "The sentiments which such good nature and benevolence might suggest, I ventured to embody, in a sort of dramatic form, in the story of La Roche." *Literature and Literati: The Literary Correspondence and Notebooks of Henry Mackenzie. Volume 1: Letters 1766-1827*, ed. Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989) 185n.

⁵⁰ Mackenzie, "Story of La Roche" 180, 185, 188, 189.

⁵¹ Mackenzie, "Story of La Roche" 185.

The same could be said of the character of Harley in *The Man of Feeling*, and of his creator. The novel is a manifesto for Christian sensibility; a form of enthusiasm tempered by resignation. Indeed, Mackenzie himself said that his book “might as well be called a Sermon as a History.”⁵² Like the sermons and memoirs of Methodist preachers, and indeed like the gospels, the *Man of Feeling* strings together miniature narratives and parables, in order to produce tears and strong feelings in its audience. Although the overall atmosphere of *The Man of Feeling* is very far from the hectic enthusiasm of Whitefield and the Methodists, and the narrative is not one of all-or-nothing salvation or damnation, Harley should certainly still be considered a kind of “weeping prophet.”

Harley is a character with strong biblical affinities. In general terms, the whole gestural vocabulary of weeping, kissing, and falling on each other’s necks, characteristic of Mackenzie’s writing, has biblical sources, including the reconciliations between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis. The latter reads: “And he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Moreover, he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them.”⁵³ There are several New Testament images too. Harley is in many respects a Christ-figure: going about doing good, with an air of other-worldliness, sensitivity, and moral vision. Harley witnesses a penitent prostitute bathing her father’s feet with her tears, in a clear echo of the biblical story of the woman taken in sin, who did the same to Jesus.⁵⁴ A moment earlier the woman’s father had threatened her and Harley with his sword before being persuaded by the woman’s desperate protestations of her true penitence: “He laid his left hand on his heart – the sword dropped from his right – he burst into tears.”⁵⁵ The same pattern is repeated in a scene between Harley and Old Edwards later in the book. Harley is instructed by his wise old friend to put his sword back into its sheath, and later bursts into tears.⁵⁶ For the prostitute’s father, and for Harley, as for St Peter in the gospel accounts, a sword is replaced by tears, a gesture of violent action by one of resignation.⁵⁷ In sharing tears with the unfortunates that he meets, whether in a debtor’s prison, a brothel, or an asylum,

⁵² This was a comment put, in the novel, in the mouth of the curate as a description of the narrative he has discovered. It is used by Mackenzie in a letter to his cousin, written in July 1769, to describe an early draft of the novel. Mackenzie, *Letters to Elizabeth Rose* 18.

⁵³ Genesis 45:14 (King James Version).

⁵⁴ Mackenzie, *Man of Feeling*, ed. Harkin 93 (chapter 29).

⁵⁵ Mackenzie, *Man of Feeling*, ed. Harkin 93.

⁵⁶ Mackenzie, *Man of Feeling*, ed. Harkin 110-12 (chapter 34).

⁵⁷ John 18:11; Matthew 26:75.

Harley embodies the injunction in St Paul's letter to the Romans (12:15) to "weep with them that weep."

Harley is a character not of this world. As he lies dying, from a fever caught while tending to Old Edwards, Harley reflects that he never delighted in the bustle and gaiety of the world: "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." In the final paragraph of the book the narrator reflects that to visit Harley's grave, and by implication to reflect on the injustices and misfortunes he encountered, and on Harley's death, will "make you hate the world." But the narrator corrects himself, "No: there is such an air of gentleness around that I can hate nothing; but as to the world – I pity the men of it." Harley's tears are tears of lamentation, of resignation, and of pity. The attitude of sorry detachment from and pity for a corrupt world chimes with Barbauld's weeping that "the spoiler is among the works of God," and Doddridge's interpretation of Jesus's tears as displaying a mixture of pity and lamentation, both regretting and judging the world, weeping over Jerusalem "as a humane and compassionate Judge looks with Compassion on those Criminals, whom for wise, and on the whole, benevolent Reasons, he gives up to Destruction."⁵⁸ Harley's world is full of criminals.

Mackenzie, writing about himself, confessed to a "Tincture of Melancholy Enthusiasm." This phrase captures well the ethos of his most famous novel.⁵⁹ Here was a gentle form of enthusiasm marked by sensitivity, resignation, pity, and lament. This was a particular kind of Christian sermon, and set alongside the tears of Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Jeremiah, Jesus, Peter, Mary Magdalene, and Paul, Harley's tears in *The Man of Feeling* seem less outlandish and less laughable.

Revolutionary Enthusiasm

In the eighteenth century, then, weeping was much more than what it would later become, for some, a mere "expression of emotion." It was a moral and religious activity; something to be cultivated, tutored, practiced, learned, performed. To shed a tear could signify the violent and sudden transition of one's soul from one state to another; it could be an act of lamentation over the sins of the world and the reign of death; or it could be a token, tendered in sympathy and compassion, for the sufferings of another. In all these cases, tears

⁵⁸ Doddridge 13.

⁵⁹ Letter to Elizabeth Rose, 23 March 1771, Mackenzie, *Letters to Elizabeth Rose* 77.

in the eighteenth century had about them a suggestion of enthusiasm; they could be signs of feeling, of fervour, even of fanaticism. For most of the century, in Britain, the admirable warmth and humanity discerned in the act of weeping seemed to outweigh the anxiety that a shower of tears could signal the beginning of a torrent of unrestrained passion. But that would change quite rapidly during the final decade of the century, in the wake of the French Revolution. In this final section, I turn to the thoughts and tears of some of the men and women who took part in public political debates about the French Revolution and its meanings in the 1790s, to explore how the consensus over tears was disrupted and new ideas about weeping and national identity emerged.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, commentators on all sides of the British political debate discerned in each other's tears something dangerous and disreputable. The perception soon spread that the cult of sensibility and the philosophy of the French Revolution were both based on a dangerous belief in the central importance of human feeling: a belief that could lead to unrestrained passions, to violence, and to dangerous ideas about democracy and equality. All the participants in the debate were steeped in the religious and literary cultures of tears that I have already delineated, and so there was a struggle, and a discontinuity, as they made an incomplete and sometimes incoherent transition to their new, more sceptical views of weeping and sensibility. The case of Mary Wollstonecraft is instructive. In 1789, when working as a novice writer for the publisher Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft produced an anthology under the pseudonym "Mr Cresswick, Teacher of Elocution." The work, a compendium of sentimental, moral and religious extracts was called, *The Female Reader: or, Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse, Selected from the Best Writers, and Disposed Under Proper Heads, for the Improvement of Young Women*.⁶⁰ Sitting alongside each other as the first two selections in the book were Henry Mackenzie's story of the sentimental clergyman La Roche, and the history of Joseph from the book of Genesis, including all the kisses and tears of his reconciliation with his brothers: further confirmation of the ways that sentimental novels and biblical texts were read alongside, and no doubt into, each other. Throughout *The Female Reader*, periodical pieces from the *Spectator*, the *Mirror*, and the *Rambler*, along with extracts from popular conduct books, and poetical works, were interspersed with biblical texts. Mrs Barbauld's "Hymn on Death" was included in the section of "Allegories and Pathetic Pieces," alongside all the most tearful biblical stories. This was a veritable handbook of religious weeping. It seemed that young women were to be improved primarily via the exercise of their lachrymal glands.

⁶⁰ Mr Cresswick [Mary Wollstonecraft], *The Female Reader* (London: J. Johnson, 1789).

However, only one year later, when it came to thinking about the proper response to the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft, along with other radicals such as Thomas Paine, attacked Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) precisely for its deployment of a tearful sensibility. The offending passages in Burke's treatise, which he had been warned by his friend Philip Francis would bring "mischief" and a "multitude of objections," concerned the French queen.⁶¹ Burke recalled setting eyes on Marie Antoinette in the 1770s, and wrote that there "surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision." The future queen had been "glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendour, and joy." Burke contrasted this vision with the spectacle of an armed and ugly Parisian mob dragging the queen and king back from Versailles to their residence in Paris in October 1789. "Oh! What a revolution! "Burke exclaimed, "and what a heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall!"⁶² To Francis's criticism of the passage as "pure foppery," Burke replied that it was, in fact, entirely sincere, and that the contrast between the queen's former splendour and her current humiliation had indeed drawn tears from him, which had "wetted my paper" as he wrote.⁶³

Wollstonecraft lambasted Burke for his tears of sympathy with Marie Antoinette, and his apparent indifference to the plight of the sick, the poor, and the enslaved: "Such misery demands more than tears," she wrote, accusing Burke of "infantine sensibility."⁶⁴ Echoing Wollstonecraft, Paine wrote of Burke, that in lamenting the ill-treatment of the French queen but ignoring the victims of absolute power, "He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird." Mr Burke's "tragic paintings" of the French Revolution, were, Paine wrote, "well calculated for theatrical representation" and designed "to produce, through the weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect."⁶⁵ On both sides, controversialists accused each other of the kind of theatrical, and by implication insincere

⁶¹ *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, Volume VI: July 1789–December 1791*, eds. Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 87.

⁶² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Dodsley, 1790) 112.

⁶³ *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, Volume VI* 86, 91.

⁶⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 62.

⁶⁵ Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man, Part I*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 70-71, 72.

weeping made famous on the London stage by David Garrick and Sarah Siddons.⁶⁶

In the bestselling works of Thomas Paine, opposition to Christianity, to monarchy, and to Burke's style of weeping all coalesced in a new configuration. A deeply heterodox clergyman in the 1720s had similarly combined scepticism about the biblical accounts of Jesus's miracles with hostility to weeping. According to Thomas Woolston, it was absurd to suppose that Jesus would shed tears over a man whom he was about to raise from the dead. And, in any case "A Stoical Apathy had better become him, than such childish and effeminate Grief." Woolston went on to allege that some "ancient Catholicks" were so offended that they expunged the words "Jesus wept" from their bibles altogether.⁶⁷ As we have seen, this was a minority view for most of the eighteenth century, the majority taking the view of Woolston's critic Nathaniel Lardner, who saw nothing weak or effeminate in the tears of Christ, but only admirable signs of compassion and tender sentiment.⁶⁸ However, the French Revolution marked a turning point. Views such as Woolston's and Paine's gradually became more common.

It now became standard to assert that the rivers of tears which once flowed through the literature of sensibility had now, through the triumph of a dangerous humanistic cult of feeling, become the rivers of blood which flowed out of the French Revolution. Sympathisers with the Revolution were found guilty, by association, of hypocrisy and sentimentality. When Charles James Fox burst into tears on the floor of the House of Commons in 1791, he was derided by the author of one satirical letter to a newspaper: "I conceive, Sir, and almost with tears in my eyes, that this crying fashion has been imported from the French, who, in the whole business of the Revolution, have shewn themselves great

⁶⁶ On the tears of Burke, Charles James Fox, and others in the French Revolution debate, see Carter, "Tears and the Man," and, especially, Daniel O'Quinn, "Fox's Tears: The Staging of Liquid Politics," *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture*, eds. Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) 194-221.

⁶⁷ Thomas Woolston, *A Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour, in View of the Present Controversy between Infidels and Apostates*, 2nd ed. (London: printed for the author, 1727) 39-40. Woolston was a mystic, a controversialist, and wrongly accused by some of being a Deist. He insisted that scripture should be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally, including the accounts of Jesus's miracles. See William H. Trapnell, "Woolston, Thomas (*bap.* 1668, *d.* 1733)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., Jan 2008) accessed 31 July 2012.

⁶⁸ Nathaniel Lardner, *A Vindication of Three of our Blessed Saviour's Miracles*, 2nd ed. (London: Sanders, 1731) 74-77.

masters of stage effect.”⁶⁹ An image marking the triumph of Nelson over Napoleon in the naval battle of the Nile in 1798 showed Fox as a crocodile, wearing a revolutionary cockade, shedding phoney tears for the French.⁷⁰ In the same year, James Gillray produced a complex allegorical image to accompany a poem in the *Anti-Jacobin* entitled “New Morality.” The poem mocked the “child of nature” who had been taught by Rousseau to weep first for the “crush’d beetle” and “the widow’d dove;” secondly for the sufferings of the guilty; and only finally for family, friends, king and country. Gillray’s illustration depicted “Sensibility” as one of the three unappealing muses of the revolutionaries, weeping over a dead bird, conjuring up memories of a famous sentimental painting by Greuze.⁷¹

Even though there were tears on all sides of this debate, it was certainly Fox and the revolutionary sympathisers who appeared more inclined to tearful responses and who ultimately became associated with all that was wrong with tearful, French sensibility. Major John Cartwright, a veteran campaigner for parliamentary reform in Britain, wrote, in his *Letter to the Duke of Newcastle* (1792) that in seeing “many millions of my fellow creatures suddenly redeemed from a cruel servitude,” by the events of the French Revolution, “my heart leaped with joy, and the tear of extatic gratitude to the Disposer of events, glistened in my eye.” It was the “First Great Cause of all,” whom Cartwright considered to be the “true and proper author of a revolution in human affairs so beneficent, so grand, so astonishing.”⁷² It was appropriate that a tearful response to the French Revolution, which itself attempted to replace Christianity with a new Cult of Reason devoted to the Supreme Being, should have been couched in terms of a “First Great Cause” rather than the Christian God. Helen Maria Williams, whose own weeping “at a tale of distress” had inspired a Wordsworth sonnet a few years earlier, now wept over the glories of the French Revolution, as she described the “sublime spectacle” of the festival of federation in her *Letters written in France in*

⁶⁹ “How to Cry!” *St James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 10-12 May, 1791. See also O’Quinn 210.

⁷⁰ Isaac Cruikshank, *The Gallant Nellson [sic] Bringing Home Two Uncommon Fierce French Crocodiles from the Nile* (London: S.W. Fores, 7 October 1798).

⁷¹ George Canning, John Hookham Frere, George Ellis, et al., *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* (London: J. Wright, 1799) 225; James Gillray, *New Morality; – or – The promis’d Installment of the High-Priest of the Theophilanthropes, with the Homage of Leviathan and his Suite* (London: John Wright for the Anti-Jacobin Review, 1 August 1798). See also Ellis 192-97; Barker 86-119.

⁷² Major John Cartwright, *A Letter to the Duke of Newcastle, with some Remarks Touching the French Revolution* (London: J.S. Jordan, 1792) 81-82.

*the Summer of 1790.*⁷³ The festival was a huge, secular celebration of the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and a public display of loyalty to the new constitution, the nation, its laws, and, for the moment, its reformed monarchy. Williams reported that crowds of women held up their infants in their arms and “melting into tears, promised to make their children imbibe, from their earliest age, an inviolable attachment to the principles of the new constitution.” Williams herself was not indifferent to this spectacle:

Oh no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears; and I shall never forget the sensations of that day, “while memory holds her seat in my bosom.”⁷⁴

Readers in Britain could not have hoped for a more powerful and succinct statement of the new enthusiasm that was taking hold of the French, and threatened to win round British sympathisers too. As events in France took increasingly alarming and bloody turns, enthusiasm for the “common feelings of humanity” seemed an ever-more dangerous doctrine, and “distinctions of country” were asserted emphatically and with violence, as Britain waged war against France for best part of the next quarter-century.

It was against this backdrop that, for the first time, at the end of the eighteenth century, questions of nationality and national identity became as prominent as ones of religious practice and moral philosophy, in thinking about the meanings of tears. British men and women sought now to differentiate themselves from the French, and other foreigners, as much as from those of different religious, artistic, or political persuasions. By the end of the nineteenth century it would become quite standard to think about national characteristics in terms of race and heredity, but a century earlier this was not a common mode of thought. In 1872, Charles Darwin gave his scientific imprimatur to the view that, unlike “savages,” and unlike continental Europeans, “Englishmen rarely cry.”⁷⁵

⁷³ William Wordsworth, “Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress,” *European Magazine*, 40 (1787): 202.

⁷⁴ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France*, eds. Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001) 67, 69.

⁷⁵ Darwin 155.

The ground was prepared for this idea by political debates that had taken place in the final decade of the eighteenth century. The earliest statements I have found linking aversion to tears with the English national character date to the 1790s.⁷⁶ The most striking and clear-cut of these comes in the second volume of the *Letters from France* by Helen Maria Williams, published in 1792. Two years on from her first revolutionary fervour, Williams reflected on those “distinctions of country” that she had earlier set aside. Now she observed differences:

You will see Frenchmen bathed in tears at a tragedy. An Englishman has quite as much sensibility to a generous or tender sentiment; but he thinks it would be unmanly to weep; and, though half choaked with emotion, he scorns to be overcome, contrives to gain the victory over his feelings, and throws into his countenance as much apathy as he can well wish.

Williams concluded that, “We seem to have strange dread in England of indulging any kind of enthusiasm.”⁷⁷ Thanks to the French Revolution, a new phase had now begun in the history of British attitudes to tears.

⁷⁶ Studies of the longer history of ideas about English national character include Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁷⁷ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters from France: Containing a Great Variety of Original Information Concerning the Most Important Events that have Occurred in that Country*, 2 vols. (Dublin: J. Chambers, 1794) 1:181. This volume was reviewed in *The English Review*, 20 (1792): 57-60; and in *The Monthly Review*, 9 (1792): 93-98. Both reviews quoted this particular passage, the former noting that it demonstrated the “enthusiasm of our fair writer” (59).