

H-France Review Vol. 8 (August 2008), No. 107

Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. viii + 300 pp. Notes, figures, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 US (hb). ISBN 978-0-8018-8430-6.

Review by Miranda Spieler, University of Arizona.

At the center of Lynn Festa's study of empire and sentimentality is the emergence during the second half of the eighteenth century of a new language for representing marginal groups at home and in the colonies of England and France. In Festa's account, seemingly tenderhearted depictions of enslaved and conquered people made sympathetic identification with them impossible on the part of European writers and their public. In this sense, her book offers a counter-point to the work of David Brion Davis, who connects the spread of a new "ethic of benevolence, personified in the 'man of feeling,'" to the development of British abolitionism.[1] In contrast, Festa suggests that expressions of benevolence tended to distance and even to dehumanize people while bestowing new visibility on their afflictions. As the world grew smaller, it was not only or even chiefly by means of racial hierarchies and exotic descriptions that European writers constructed boundaries between themselves and colonized people; of equal importance, from the late eighteenth century forward, were the subtleties that underlay affirmations of compassion and solicitude.

In chapter one, "The Distinction of Sentimental Feeling," Festa theorizes the difference between sympathy and sentimentality by looking to texts by Hume, Smith, Rousseau, Diderot and Raynal. Here she seeks to understand the "disruptive nature of experiencing the feelings of another" (p. 11). Sympathy involves a collapse between self and other that occurs the moment one begins to feel what another feels or to see oneself through another's eyes; sympathy is thus incommensurate with imperial domination and subversive of it. In contrast, sentimentality offered a means of positioning the self in relation to the other that made impossible the mobility of perspective that sympathy entails.

Remaining chapters of the volume explore the way that relations between self and other are mediated by things (objects or representations of them) in a practical sense and occluded by things in an intellectual or affective one. In Chapter Two, "Sterne's Snuffbox," Festa examines the problem of sentimental value as a theme in the writings of Lawrence Sterne. The chapter takes its title from "the most celebrated sentimental object in eighteenth-century literature": the snuffbox acquired by the parson Yorick from Lorenzo, a mendicant monk in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) (p. 69). Yorick begins by dodging the elderly friar ("I had predetermined not to give him a single *sou*"), but meets him again, in the company of a fetching woman. While attempting to win the woman's favor, Yorrick gallantly offers his tortoiseshell snuffbox to the monk, who gives his own horn snuffbox in return; this becomes Yorick's most treasured possession ("I guard this box, as I would the instrumental parts of my religion").[2] Festa builds outward from this odd transaction to theorize sentimental value in light of Annette Weiner's feminist critique of Bronislaw Malinowski.[3] In Festa's reading, a sentimentally-valued thing is a thing invested with significances that make it impossible to exchange, on terms of equivalence, with any other object. Because sentimentally-valued things seem to exist outside the capitalist system, they allow their owners an albeit illusory escape from the taint of the marketplace. More generally, they are a means of affirming one's personal independence and authenticity against impingements by "the herd of the world" (p. 78).

In fact, the tenderness elicited by such curios is not at all harmless. In the world remade by sentimental value, the place of the other is usurped by an inanimate thing endowed with human-like qualities. These are objects that derive their aura of inestimability from being repositories and extensions of their owners' sense of self. And yet they are not as aloof to market principles as they at first appear. As Festa notes, there was an eighteenth-century cult of Lorenzo, a market in Yorick snuffboxes following the publication of Sterne's book. She observes, "To acquire sentimental feeling in the form of an object like a snuffbox is to shortcut the emotional labor that creates a human relation to the world. . ." (p. 81). Ultimately, Festa reveals sentimentally valued things to be solipsistic repudiations of the other more than fond reminders of him.

Festa extends her investigation of subject-object relations in the sentimental mode into Chapter Three, "Tales Told By Things," where she begins by exploring popular English novels in which quotidian artifacts—coins, coaches, canes, coats—describe their wandering through human society. These talking object tales, sentimental journeys of a kind, tend to conjure a benign image of empire, capitalism, and slavery. The pet-like objects that narrate these stories cannot take their minds off the people who abuse and fondle them. They recall the delights of having a master and the heartbreak of losing one. The talking imperial coin in Helenus Scott's *Adventures of a Rupee* (1784) loves being in British hands.

In such stories, human subjectivity is everywhere and nowhere—conspicuously absent when simulatedly present. As Festa observes, language that humanizes is always ironic: it implies the absence of humanness. No one would mistake a talking frock-coat for a human. She is particularly incisive on this point. "Personifications are figural proxies that arise in the absence of subjectivity. They mark the *non*-appearance of a person" (p. 131).

That talking objects, especially talking books, make frequent appearances in autobiographies by former slaves allows Festa to move from her discussion of tales told by things into a reading of the *Interesting Narrative* by Olaudah Equiano (1789), the famed Afro-British journalist and abolitionist. Festa suggests that sentimental rhetoric, in blurring the distinction between persons and things, duplicates the logic of slavery. As a result, even former slaves who claimed a voice in autobiographies were unable to carve out identities as self-directed individuals in the contaminated medium of sentimental prose. Festa depicts these stories about the recovery of personhood as unfulfilled tales of becoming in which the manumitted slave, upon crossing the boundary from legal *res* to legal person, finds that he is a mere object awaiting animation and direction by the hands of God.

Olaudah Equiano wrote his *Interesting Narrative* to advance the cause of abolitionism in England. In Chapter Four, "Making Humans Human," Festa addresses the moral limitedness of British abolitionist discourse and the role of sentimentality in shaping its contours. The figure of a kneeling slave in shackles that appeared on a Wedgwood medallion with the legend, "Am I not a man and a brother?" expressed broader shortcomings of the abolitionist movement. To Festa, the Wedgwood figure exemplifies what she calls the trope of redundant personification—humanizing the already human. To the extent that the Wedgwood figure stimulated emotion in the viewer, it was exclusively the feeling of oneness with fellow white abolitionists. And that identification, notes Festa, "is connected to the repudiation of being another, of being a slave" (p. 170).

In Chapter Five, "Global Commerce in Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*," Festa suggests that sentimental tropes helped forge a new language of global history in Raynal's work. Raynal, Diderot, and other contributors to the *History* depict commerce as a world system that draws remote peoples into relation with one another while creating new forms of affective isolation. In their account, the men who rule the world from small desks and remote encampments express unembarrassed indifference toward the people they destroy. In an apparent attempt to reverse creeping global numbness, the *History* includes apostrophes, written by Diderot, to the reader in the voice of the narrator and, in many cases, in the voice of imperial peoples. Festa draws attention to the problematic nature of this "catalog of victims in

an array of postures of supplication and abjection" to signal the lack of cultural specificity surrounding the figures who speak—whether Indians, Hottentots, or slaves—or who are spoken for (p. 226). At the same time, she recognizes the book's revolutionary character. Sentimental tropes "at times outstrip the aims and intentions of their authors" (p. 232). In this case, the apostrophes to the reader by individuals "adorned with barely enough decorative cultural detail . . . to locate them . . . in time and space" open unexpected, radical possibilities (p. 227). The very unreality of imperial victims in the *History*, their resemblance to man in general, may help readers from different eras and cultural contexts to insert themselves into the text, to "shake off the myopia of [his] own worldview," and to see such people as embodiments of a universal rights-bearing subject (pp. 231-232).

In her conclusion to the volume, "The Peripheral Vision of the Enlightenment," Festa follows Gayatri Spivak in lamenting the manufacture of denatured imperial others by Western scholars who fancy themselves to be engaged in benevolent restorative projects.<sup>[4]</sup> Read against Festa's portrait of the eighteenth century, scholarly efforts to recover the agency of colonial subjects become acts of redundant personification—a matter of exerting oneself to prove that a noted characteristic of human beings everywhere is indeed present where one least expects it. In turn, to accord voice to colonized peoples and to conjure stories of resistance is to risk ventriloquizing the European political imagination and going the way of Diderot and Raynal.

Festa's unsparing shakedown of European subjectivity in the age of empire and beyond makes this book a salutary read for historians, who may catch unflattering glimpses of themselves throughout the volume. It is a book that invites reflection upon the ethical problems that narrators confront when representing marginal people and violence against them. The contemporary resonance of this study, as well as its gliding prose, help to make this a constantly interesting book, though not an unflawed one.

In her introduction, Festa writes, "Although I analyze the sentimental construction of the category of the person, I do not attempt to identify places where the subaltern can speak or has spoken" (p. 13). The riddle a reader confronts, upon reaching the third chapter of the volume, is that of squaring this early disclaimer with Festa's inclusion of writing by subaltern people—namely, the autobiographies of former slaves.

Henry Louis Gates has argued that former slaves who wrote their memoirs found in literacy a means of triumphing over the objectifying logic of slavery by becoming subjects, masters of their own story.<sup>[5]</sup> In contrast, Festa applies Paul de Man's reading of Romantic autobiography to the slave narrative; in effect, she argues that former slaves who wrote their autobiographies could not help being thrown back upon the experiential reality, or site of speech, of the enslaved persons who come to life as characters in these memoirs.

The application of de Man's criticism to slave narratives raises a number of problems that I can only briefly sketch here. De Man's essay on Wordsworth, "Autobiography as De-Facement," like his other essays on Romanticism, engages the problem of a writer who seeks to use the imagination as a way of transcending the boundaries of humanness.<sup>[6]</sup> In the essay, de Man defines autobiography through the relationship it creates between a reader (who here would be the memoirist) and the figure that speaks as I on the page. He suggests that the I who reads and the figural I in the text are enlaced, fused and differentiated in a circular, unending fashion that he compares to a revolving door. De Man calls this the "specular" or mirroring structure of autobiography. Where this account of autobiography suggests a visual encounter, where two beings face one another, de Man provides a second, complementary description of autobiography that emphasizes the obscurity which lies between the two partners in this odd exchange, who are unenvisagable to one another, and yet confer a face upon one another. The distinguishing trope of autobiography is prosopopeia, which de Man defines as "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (p. 75).

The text that de Man uses to demonstrate the dangers of prosopopeia is Wordsworth's autobiographical *Essays on Epitaphs*. De Man argues that a maker of epitaphic inscriptions summons voices from the grave that bend back and absorb the writer into the deathly reality from which the voices issue. Thus the Romantic's straining toward immortality is undone by the trope he uses to attempt this.

De Man presumes that autobiographical writers aim to secure their immortality and thus to place themselves above other humans. The same cannot be said of former slaves who write their memoirs. Such people write (among other reasons) to affirm or to prove their humanness before an undecided public. For this sort of narrator, the danger of prosopopeia, as de Man describes it, is not that of death. At stake is the danger of being enveloped by a different kind of nothingness--the relational nothingness depicted in these books, the one inhabited by the non-human or sub-human as defined by a society of slaveholders. It thus seems, at least to this reader, that to apply de Man's interpretation of autobiography to slave narratives is to enact the dehumanization of the subaltern subject, against which Festa's whole study otherwise warns.

In his recent biography of Equiano Olaudah, Vincent Carretta offers quite a different reading than Festa of self-abnegating religious language in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. Carretta suggests that Equiano Olaudah borrowed from the conventions of spiritual autobiography so as to model himself after Bunyan's Everyman and thereby force Christian readers to recognize themselves in him.[7] Language that functions, in Festa's account, to reduce the self-actuating former slave to a mere object is for Carretta a purposeful device that makes sympathy possible.

In her conclusion, Festa suggests that sentimentality lost its association with nominally anti-imperial movements to become the privileged idiom of empire in the nineteenth century. In this sense, Festa's study traces the habits of mind and expression that later made it possible to justify conquest in the name of benevolent solicitude. Among the things elided by this forward-looking glance at empire and sentimentality beyond the Enlightenment are the experiences of people of color in the Caribbean as they crossed into the nineteenth century. Sentimental imperialism was not part of that world. Instead came the reenslavement of citizens in Guadeloupe and French Guiana, the invasion of Saint Domingue, and a ban against blacks entering domestic France. Wordsworth wrote a poem about sharing a coach from Calais with an expelled woman. "She was a Negro Woman driv'n from France/ Rejected like all others of that race/ Not one of whom may now find footing there".[8]

## NOTES

[1] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 46. For the case of domestic France, see David J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[2] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy and Continuation of the Bramine's Journal with Related Texts*, Melvyn New and W.G. Day, eds. (Hackett: Indianapolis, 2006), pp. 8 and 25.

[3] Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Giving-While-Keeping* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: The University of California Press, 1992).

[4] See for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in his *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

[5] Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Introduction: The Talking Book," in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William L.

---

Andrews, eds., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment 1772-1815* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas Counterpoint, 1998).

[6] Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *MLN* (December 1979) 94 (5): 919-30; reprinted in Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[7] Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), pp. 325-6.

[8] William Wordsworth, "September 1st 1802," in Stephen Gill ed., *The Major Works* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 283. On the predicament of blacks in France during the Napoleonic period, and the unsystematic application of the 1802 ban, see Michael D. Sibal, "Les Noirs en France sous Napoléon: L'enquête de 1807," in Yves Bénot and Marcel Dorigny, eds., *Rétablissement de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises: 1802, Ruptures et continuités de la politique coloniale française (1800-1830), aux origines d'Haïti* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003), 95-107.

Miranda Spieler  
University of Arizona  
mspieler@email.arizona.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172