A View of the Past: History, Painting and the Manipulation of Distance

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I

The aim of Mark Salber Phillips's important new work on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historiography is not only to uncover and describe the variety of sub-genres of history current in that period, but to redirect modern historians to a proper understanding of their worth.[1] For too long, Phillips claims, modern historians have paid more attention to the criticisms of Victorian historians – a group, he suggests, more congenial to us in spirit and method anyway – than we have to the works themselves; apart, of course, from the big two, Hume and Gibbon. Because of this, we have lost sight both of the challenges facing historical prose in the eighteenth century, and of the often ingenious means by which historians met those challenges.[2]

What Phillips seeks to chart is how historians in the eighteenth century sought to divest themselves of the ancient form of their genre, the classical historical narrative. Though this form had long been the defining feature of the genre, in the eighteenth century it proved increasingly difficult to adapt to the new modes of living and of feeling that that period developed, and which readers wished to see represented in the texts they read to inform upon their lives. 'Society and sentiment', the development of an increasingly urban, commercial, literate and privatised civil society, and with that the growing valorisation of the tender and domestic emotions (commonly figured as feminine), were, in Phillips's account, what led to a radical experimentation in the form and genre of the history during the eighteenth century.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing features of this new historical writing, according to Phillips, is its willingness to experiment with, to manipulate, the

distance between audience and text. In the increasingly privatised emotional environment of the eighteenth century, this commonly meant the historian seeking to bring the audience closer to the events described, to make immediate the distresses of the suffering heroes through a variety of textual effects: Hume's representations of the deaths of Charles I and of Mary, Queen of Scots, can perhaps be seen as *the* classic examples of this practice.[3] However, though the sympathetic identification aimed for here was indeed powerful, it was also (as Phillips makes clear) quite deliberately limited. These were sentimental *scenes*, studded within a more general, more abstract prose.

This element of the new historical prose had two significant features. First, it was a prose that had abandoned the attempt to maintain continuous narrative, a prose giving a large measure of power for the reader to develop his or her own approach to the text: to skim here, to linger there, to have, in short, a wholly individual relationship to the text. Secondly, it sought to maintain the great virtue of classical narrative – its capacity to instruct – while introducing the new delights of sympathetic engagement and entertainment. Sympathetic identification with Charles I, or with Mary, Queen of Scots, might therefore be balanced by a cool assessment of their characters; and if these two elements were perceived as fundamentally opposed, and so tending towards a disruption of the history, it could be claimed that each element is in fact directed to different (and gendered) audiences, able to read that part of the history most appropriate to their positions within society.[4]

This is a powerful and significant insight. Unfortunately, however, Phillips does not pursue it as far as he might; he does coin a couple of neologisms ('*approximative*' and '*distanciating*') to describe the moves he has identified, but beyond this there seems to be only a limited appreciation of the difficulties that the manipulation of distance might force upon the historian, and indeed, upon the genre of history as a whole.[5]

In order to fill the gap which Phillips's discussion appears to display, it would seem necessary to explore the very body of work which he accuses Hayden White of omitting:

> In a history of the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe, practically no attention is given to the novel, to the Gothic revival in architecture, to history painting[6]

At several points in Phillips's work, he makes reference to a language of painting, of portraiture, of art theory, to describe what is being performed by the historians he is examining.[7] The closest he comes to a discussion of 'Historical Painting', however, occurs in relation to Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, a work which does not enable Phillips to explore the difference between painting and narrating, and the potential difficulties of simply translating the language of art into the language of historical writing.[8] A discussion of the particular problems that faced theories of painting as they attempted

to adjust to (or, as we shall see, to resist) the new interest in 'society and sentiment', and of the ways in which the artists sought to represent the past, might enable us to better understand not only the value of the developing techniques for manipulation of historical distance, but also some of their more problematic effects.

II

The issue of the relationship between history and art, writing and painting, truth and narrative, is powerfully raised in *Northanger Abbey*, a novel of particular interest to historians, not least because of its apparent assault upon the function and value of history.[9] Catherine Morland's well-known complaint that it is 'odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention', alongside with the narrator's defence of the novelist's art as opposed to the virtues of 'the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England', has guaranteed commentary upon the novel, commonly in an attempt to rescue history from so damning a charge.[10] Unsurprisingly, in defending history commentators point to Catherine's ignorance and naïvety, sensibly opposed by her two wiser friends, the Tilneys, and insist upon Austen's use here of irony. In doing so, however, they neglect the passage immediately following:

> The Tilneys were soon engaged in another [matter] on which she had nothing to say. They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing – nothing of taste: – and she listened to them with an attention which brought her little profit, for they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her. The little which she could understand however appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before. It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day. She was heartily ashamed of her ignorance.[11]

This revealing passage must give pause to any straightforward contrast between the naïve Catherine and the sophisticated Tilneys, for – as Austen's contemporaries would certainly have recognised – Austen here makes use of a discourse upon landscape that sought to align 'a correct taste' with legitimate political authority.[12]

In this discourse, John Barrell has argued that 'political authority is rightly exercised by those capable of thinking in general terms; which usually means those capable of producing abstract ideas – 'decomplex' ideas – out of the raw data experience [*sic*].'[13] This capacity can be discovered in the expression of a taste for one form of landscape as opposed to another: for 'landscapes which seek to exhibit substantial, representative forms of nature arranged in

a wide extent of land', rather than 'views which, even if panoramic, exhibit the accidental forms of nature, and, even if ideal, exhibit their forms within a restricted terrain.'[14] This is not to say that a taste for narrow, particular, or occluded views should be seen as degenerate; but that such a taste, if exclusive, is the sign of a mind incapable of comprehending the wider public interest, a taste that, if present in the mind of a 'public' man, should only be indulged in wholly private moments.

Such a landscape is one that must be produced from on high, from a position affording a broad, general view of the land below – 'from the top of an high hill', as Catherine Morland instinctively understood. It is not obvious precisely how the Tilneys sought to divide up the landscape before them, other than that the city of Bath could form no part of it; but it seems likely that they countenanced a less general view than that pressed by the dominant theories of eighteenth-century public art. If this is so, the implications are significant – for

> those who remain imprisoned within their few acres at the bottom of the eminence will have nothing like the same range of objects to examine, and will have no possibility, therefore, of deriving accurate, general classes from them. They will remain, indeed, as objects in the landscape: they will not be observers, but observed.[15]

What Austen would seem to be suggesting, in a novel that is, after all, about mis-perception, incomprehension, and lies, is that the Tilneys, for all their sophistication (indeed, perhaps as a result of their sophistication), are incapable of distinguishing between a public prospect and a private view. It is perhaps for this reason, I would suggest, that they are so sanguine at the mixture of truth and falsehood detected by Catherine – they are 'very well contented to take the false with the true … as for the little embellishments you speak of, they are embellishments, and I like them as such.'[16] Two problems would seem to arise from this content, however: that the reader's awareness of the fictional nature of the 'little embellishments' of history will tend to prevent sympathetic identification with the subjects of that history (disrupting the 'entertainment' side of Phillips' thesis); and that the capacity of these compounds of truth and falsehood to instruct must be severely limited. The most Austen's characters claim is that these histories might help little children to learn to read better works – such as those of Mrs Radcliffe.[17]

What Austen appears to be communicating is a deep dissatisfaction with the capacity of history to perform either of the functions which Phillips claims for it – having sought to expand its audience through the incorporation of sentiment into previously dry political narratives, history both undermined its capacity to instruct, and rapidly fell behind the developing genre of the novel as a form capable of entertaining. Few writers can be more aware of generic constraints than Austen – it is difficult here not to think of

her characterisation of her work as 'the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory' – and in this set-piece argument over the value of history, affected as it is by a discourse derived from theories of art, she would seem to suggest the beginnings of a fuller understanding of the implications for history of the pressure to manipulate the distance between audience and text.[18]

This may only be appreciated by exploring more deeply the contradictory pressures faced by artists, and art theorists, of the eighteenth century. First, it must be recognised that it was not only the genre of landscape painting that suffered from the interdiction upon the display of particularity; those of portraiture and, especially, of history painting itself, were also comprehended within that ban.[19] The insistence upon the need to represent ideal, not particular forms, was one which organised the hierarchy of genres, and which must be maintained for that hierarchy, and the 'natural' hierarchy (for so it was represented) of the republic of taste to be maintained. Secondly, if the 'natural' hierarchy of artistic genres and of the republic of taste would be disrupted by the introduction of a false taste for the particular, this was as nothing compared to the effects of such a taste upon the discipline of painting, and the dignity of the role of the painter himself.

For within the terms of the civic humanist theory of art, as developed by Shaftesbury and adapted by Reynolds (and responded to by almost every important theorist of art in the eighteenth century), the painter himself possessed an extremely marginal position within the republic of taste, if he was indeed felt to dwell there at all.[20] Painting, unlike poetry (with which it was commonly compared), almost of necessity represented real, tangible, particular objects, and absolutely of necessity was taught through the repetitive representation of real, tangible, particular objects. Given this, it was vulnerable to the charge that the talent displayed by the painter was no more than a manual skill, the physical capacity to draw well. It was thus no better than any other mechanical art requiring a particular craft knowledge; than weaving, potting, or smelting.

Thus the republic of taste might be built upon a paradox: the taste that gentle connoisseurs displayed to prove their position at the top of an hierarchy of both taste and virtue, and the works of art they might view, and organise into hierarchies of virtue and quality (it was of course possible to paint well in the most ignoble of artistic genres), might be stimulated and produced by workers incapable of comprehending the value of their work other than in terms of personal skill. The entire republic of taste might be built upon the labours of men and women (for if painting is a craft, it scarcely matters whether the painter be male or female) entirely excluded from that republic.[21]

The theoretical importance for painters, then, of producing images capable of expressing ideal forms, lay not only in the capacity this gave them to direct public taste, but also in its ability to elevate the craft to a liberal art. The painter capable of producing works that depicted the abstract, the ideal, was himself clearly capable of comprehending those ideal forms, and, rising above

the necessarily concrete nature of his training, of addressing the republic of taste through his works. And if this capacity was most comfortably claimed within the highest of the genres – that of heroic history painting – it was nonetheless potentially a claim that could be made even within the lower genres of portraiture and landscape painting.[22]

Of course, the civic humanist theory of painting was not the only discourse capable of organising attitudes upon distance and proximity within art. Perhaps its most significant rival in the eighteenth century was that most closely associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, the discourse of sentiment, of sensibility. Theories of sensibility (as interested in the gentle, private virtues of sociability as civic humanism was in the harder public virtues) sought to demonstrate that, in the fragmented economic world of eighteenth century Britain, commerce and luxury were not the destructive, divisive forces that civic humanism had painted them, but formed in fact the gentle chains that bound society together, in the tender bonds of friendship and sympathy.

Much work was performed to demonstrate how, precisely, this sympathy – apparently so counter-intuitive for a society ruled by the private interest inevitably promoted by commerce – was produced in human beings. Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provided perhaps the most important account of this process.[23] He considered sympathy to be an effect of the imagination; upon perceiving a person's distress, whether physical or emotional, the sympathetic viewer automatically responded by imagining how an identical pain would affect them, and in doing so would develop an affective bond with the suffering other. This potential to feel sympathy for others lay in all people, but it lay within them differently, for it was modified by the tenderness and delicacy of the individual's frame and nervous system: some bodies, though especially female bodies, possessed nerves so delicate that they thrilled to the slightest stimulus, producing powerful feelings of sympathetic pain; other, especially male bodies, were made of sterner stuff, their nerves but rarely affected so powerfully as to produce a true sympathetic response.

Sensibility, then, was primarily a spectator sport. It is notorious that the novels of sensibility commonly consisted of a series of scenes, of distress or of joy, to which the essentially passive observing hero or heroine responded appropriately – while the (theoretically, at least) essentially passive reader themselves responded to the combination of distress and sympathetic response with their own flood of sympathetic tears, of pity or of joy. It provided readers and thinkers with new ways to visualise their society, according to the dictates not of civic humanist detachment and public virtue, but of sentimental engagement, imagination, and private sensibility. Thus Barrell quotes Adam Smith:

> In my present situation an immense landscape of lawns, and woods, and distant mountain, seems to do no more than cover the little window which I write by, and to be out of all proportion less than the chamber in which I

> am sitting. I can form a just comparison between those great objects and the little objects around me, in no other way, than by transporting myself, at least in fancy, to a different situation …
>
> In the same manner, to the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance … than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connection … .Before we can make any proper comparison of … opposite interests, we must change our position. We must view them, neither from our own place, nor yet from his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connection with either, and who judges impartially between us.[24]

Thus Smith's account of the production of the social restraints necessary for the smooth functioning of a commercial society (and Barrell makes it quite clear that this passage should be considered as complementary to Smith's 'disembodied social spectator' of *The Wealth of Nations*) can be seen to be derived from a re-visioning of the panoramic view that underpinned previous accounts of taste and power.[25] Here, *all* members of society (even the philosopher) are understood to perceive the world from an occluded position, from which it is impossible to directly comprehend, not only the moral landscape, but even the particular circumstances in which they currently exist. In order to function as social animals, *all* members of society must make use of an imaginative self-projection capable of displaying to them the proper ordering of their lives, in a complete moral landscape. In the process, however, the broad view loses some of the power it previously possessed – it can no longer function 'as the image of a society wider than the one in which most of us make our private determinations on moral questions.'[26]

Moreover, there must be serious doubts as to the actual scope of this apparently democratic new attitude; for, as I have already suggested, the quality of a person's ability to sympathise, to express sensibility, depended vitally upon the nature and constitution of their bodies. And if, for the most part, this differing capacity to experience the delicate thrills of sensibility is described as a gendered difference, the soft, fine bodies of women being more susceptible to the impulses of sentiment than the hard, coarse bodies of men, it could, and should, also be understood as a class difference:

> When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation. Persons of delicate fibres and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent part of their own bodies.[27]

Here the operations of sympathy are divided upon quite clear class lines. Smith moves from the description of an universal process of identification, to a contrastive depiction of the extremes of sensibility, where an implicitly polite sensibility may be awakened by the (undesired) exposure to 'sores and ulcers', while the implicitly plebeian mob (whatever the *actual* composition of crowds attending eighteenth-century hangings, it is difficult to believe Smith perceives too many toffs to be attending) is moved only by the strongest of measures.

Here, then, we meet with what Vic Gatrell, in *The Hanging Tree*, has described as 'The Limits Of Sensibility'; the bodies of the observer and the observed are never more clearly distinguished than at the extremes of experience, extremes to which the sentimental soul was drawn the better to experience and express the delightful pains of sensibility which the objects of their vision could never appreciate.[28] Or, as Carolyn Steedman has expressed it, 'All the newly emerging theories of sensibility and empathy … could not teach you that a labouring man or woman has the same kind of body, was the same kind of person as you.'[29] Sensibility was indeed a spectator sport, was understood quite explicitly as such as it was theorised and experienced in the eighteenth century, as the very different evidences explored by Gatrell, and by historians of the sentimental novel have shown; and, as Steedman has argued in several recent articles, has continued to function in this way into the modern world, as a constitutive element of the modern self:

> It is the extremely interesting and paradoxical case that as modern selfhood has come into being, it has often been articulated through the story of the suffering other … a sense of self, of place in the world and identity, has frequently been articulated through the use of *someone else's* story of suffering, loss, exile, exploitation, pain.[30]

III

Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (Fig. 1), one of the most successful and widely viewed images produced in eighteenth-century Britain, provides the classic site for the confrontation of civic humanist and sentimental theories of painting. The delicate young hero reclines in the arms of his friends and comrades (of all ranks), his eyes cast upwards towards the breaking light to the left of the painting, as a messenger approaches with the news of the day's great victory. Embroidering upon the actually-known events of the day, West added ten figures to the group surrounding Wolfe, both heightening, through repetition, the emotional drama of the general's death, and inviting the viewer to consider themselves as closing the circle about Wolfe. Essentially a sentimental image, then, *The Death of General Wolfe* sought to produce in the viewer an emotional identification with the dying hero, and thus strengthen the emotional bonds that theories of sensibility promoted as the moral cement of society.[31]

Figure 1 Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), reproduced by permission of the National Gallery of Canada

In doing so, West broke with the dominant theory of history painting of the time on three fronts. First, he made use of modern dress, breaking with the convention that insisted that history painting, in its attempt to represent the timeless virtues of public life, should avoid the distracting, particular detail to be found in lower genres of painting such as portraiture: it has frequently been suggested that this abandonment of temporal distance between the viewer and the action represented was partly responsible for West's decision to include a Native American in the throng about Wolfe, to make clear that there remained a *spatial* distance between viewer and action. Secondly, in depicting Wolfe's death as a scene of lamentation, of the private virtues of sympathy and friendship between fighting men, West overturned the basic claim made by history painting for its superiority to other genres of painting, its ability to inculcate *public* virtues in its audience, virtues not compatible (during time of war, at least) with the indulgence of private sympathies. These contraventions of established practice have led West's painting to be viewed as causing a revolution in history painting in Britain.[32]

Finally, however, and perhaps most interestingly, West's painting broke with the demand for unity of action in the representation of events. The painting is essentially divided in two: in the foreground lies Wolfe, with his sympathetic crowd about him; in the background, however, there is represented the narrative of the day's battle, from the British troops landing at the

far right of the painting, to the messenger bringing the news of the victory at the far left. Thus a particular moment of the narrative that is represented in the background has been plucked out of time, allowing the audience to comprehend the meaning of that history, and to enter into it almost as if a participant. In this performance of history, however, there is a risk that this particular moment will overwhelm the history from which it is taken – it is actually quite difficult to see beyond the group in the foreground, after all – and it would seem that it is in the attempt to make meaningful this division of time within the painting, without disrupting the unity of the whole, that leads to a series of divisions and ambiguities both within the painting, and in its audience's various responses.

The first division to note, then, is that between the two most important figures within the painting: Wolfe himself, and the Native American. Wolfe, soft and civilised, feminine, deathly pale yet immaculately presented, his two wounds showing no more than the faintest drizzles of blood, seemingly oblivious to the world about him as he achieves his apotheosis, is in stark contrast to the hard, exotically savage, masculine, semi-naked Native American who watches the hero's death with a keen gaze. The two clearly operate as a binary, the identity of the one informing upon the identity of the other; however, the actual nature of this binary relationship has been the subject of some controversy. David Solkin, in *Painting for Money*, has claimed that the Native American's 'expressionless gaze serves to define an otherness which is both un-British and uncivilised', an otherness that thus defines Britishness and civilisation through absolute opposition; Emily Neff, however, insists that 'West's meticulous rendering of the wrinkled brow of the American Indian's forehead, a gesture of concern, refutes this'.[33] She considers the Native American instead to function as a 'touchstone for characters throughout who act properly', to be a

> Rousseau-like noble savage whose foreign status provides a cultural innocence that allows him to receive the painting's messages of courage, loyalty, and patriotism. His wrinkled brow suggests his compassion, but his expression is more complex than those of the other mourners who merely express sympathy. An outsider looking in, he becomes the equivalent of the spectator: much like the mid-ground figure, who links past to present, he joins painting to audience[34]

Although Neff has, I think, seen somewhat further than Solkin, I want to suggest that in fact both critics can be understood to be right.

In order to produce works of art that exploited the discourse of sensibility, it was necessary to codify the correct physical representations of emotion (thus Neff makes reference to both painting and dramatic manuals showing artists and actors the correct postures and facial expressions to assume) which then leads to the possibility, indeed, the suspicion, that the 'spontaneously

generated' emotion described by the discourse of sensibility is, in fact, a wholly learned set of public attitudes that describe not the internal emotional state of the individual, but that individual's sense, at any given moment, of the socially expected sentiment.[35] There was, therefore, a contradiction internal to the discourse of sensibility – and it is my contention that this contradiction can be found in *The Death of General Wolfe*, in the split between the savage American and the civilised hero.

This suspicion may well be generated through the tattooing upon the body of the Native American (Fig. 2). This tattooing, this turning of the human body into a canvas, would seem to refer to the act of painting itself, drawing attention to the constructed nature of all expressions upon the canvas, thus rendering them, and the responses to them, all suspicious, though perhaps none so much as that of the Native American. When the difference between a wrinkled brow and a piece of body art is so slight, there can hardly be any surprise that modern critics have difficulty in understanding the Native American's gaze.

Oddly, however, it is Wolfe, not the Native American, who seems to pose the major problems for the eighteenth-century viewer. We can understand the reason for this more clearly, perhaps, if we consider the sources that allowed such an audience to understand the Native American. One such source may well have been the engravings produced in Robinson's *Compleat and Impartial History Of England* of 'The Antient Britons' (Fig. 3), engravings that would seem to be derived from illustrations appearing in Speed's *History of Great Britaine* (first published in 1611, with at least three editions and a total of seven reissues by 1650), and which were themselves later to appear in Owen's *Compleat and Impartial History of The Ancient Britons*.[36] These illustrations show the ancient Britons to be as savage and as lavishly tattooed as any Native American, and should remind us of the eighteenth century's insistence upon the existence of an universal, trans-historical human subject. The Native American, far from existing as an absolute Other to the civilised self of General Wolfe and his sympathetic witnesses, could be viewed quite simply as the savage stage of that modern self.

If there are any doubts about this, it may be useful to glance at Richards's *The Aboriginal Britons, A Poem*.[37] The poem begins with an address to the adventurous modern British, regressing them through seventeen hundred years of history to discover the eponymous aboriginal Britons, who were, Richards asserts, as savage as any people the modern sailor might discover:

> Ye sons of Albion, who with venturous sails
> In unknown oceans caught Atlantic gales …
> View'd on the coast the wondering Savage stand,
> Uncouth, and fresh from his Creator's hand …
> A form like this, illustrious souls, of yore
> Your own Britannia's sea-girt island wore:

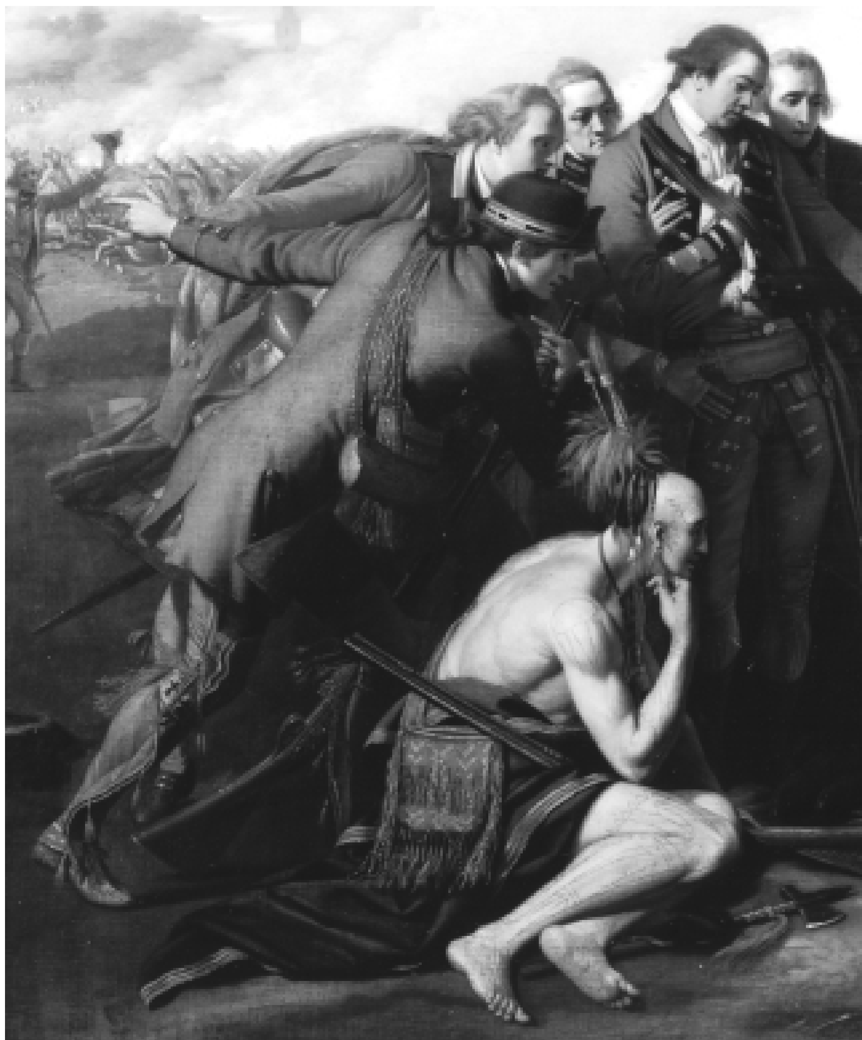

Figure 2 Detail from Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), reproduced by permission of the National Gallery of Canada

> Ere Danish lances blushed with Ælla's blood;
> Or blue-ey'd Saxons sail'd on Medway's flood;
> Or Dover's towering cliff from high descried
> Cæsar's bold barks, which stemm'd a deep untried.[38]

Richards moves on to describe an ancient Briton more fully:

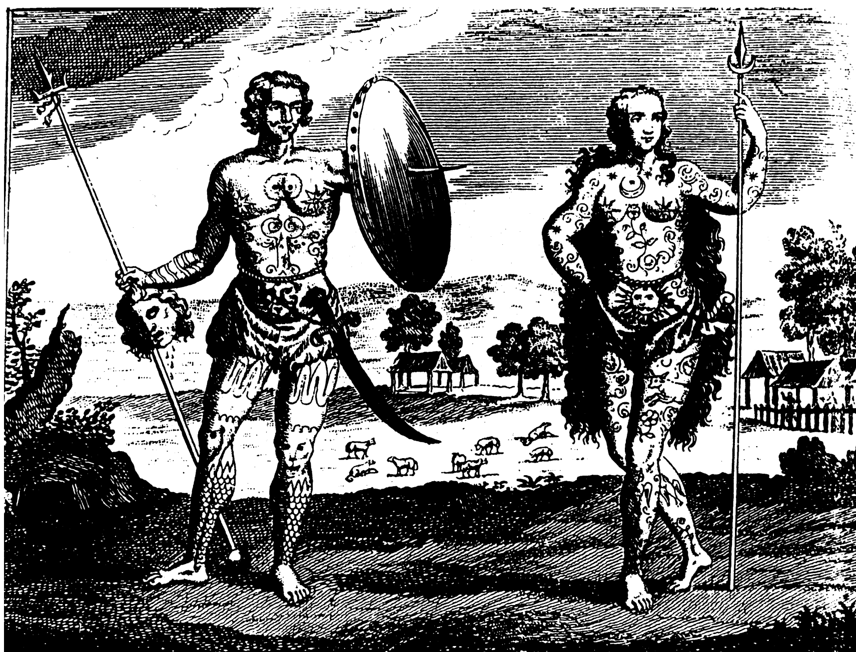

Figure 3 *The Ancient Britons*, from J. Robinson, *A Compleat and Impartial History of England* (London, 1739), facing p. 4.

> His scarr'd and rudely-painted limbs around
> Fantastic horror-striking figures frown'd
> Which, monster-like, ev'n to the confines ran
> Of nature's work, and left him hardly man.[39]

Here it seems clear that Richards is thinking of, describing even, the illustrations provided by Speed, Robinson, and Owen. These illustrations provided a means for this writer (and, surely, for other viewers of the illustrations) to comprehend the encounter with the savage other as, in fact, an encounter with the savage self; a self as yet untamed by history, as yet untrammelled by defeat at the hands of invading peoples.

Wolfe and the Native American, then, can be understood to exist both as binary opposites, as the Self and Other of the classic post-colonialist paradigm, and as the beginning and end of a single process of historical development.[40] This is a divide that recalls the prime divide of the painting itself, that between the exemplary moment and the explanatory narrative, and which also relates to the Native American's function as a distancing mechanism, as the reminder to the audience that it is a *history* painting that is before them.

And it was this knowledge of the generic conventions that the painting breaks (the audience only being able to recognise that these conventions have been broken through the Native American's distancing function) that lead several viewers (including, most eminently, Pitt the Elder, the Earl of Chatham) to criticise the representation of Wolfe and his mourners as wholly unsuitable. Indeed, one group of viewers went so far as to perform the history anew:

> One young woman felt the hero should be depicted responding rapturously to the news that the enemy fled, rather than enduring his private pain, and the famous actor David Garrick, in front of the painting and a small audience, reenacted [*sic*] the role of Wolfe according to the 'correction' she offered.[41]

Evidently, West's sentimental representation of Wolfe appeared to some viewers to be inappropriate to the genre in which it appeared, and to fail to provide an adequate entry to the 'correct' meaning of the image, which had to be re-enacted in order to be rendered fully meaningful and usable.

If all the figures around Wolfe were incapable of realising the true patriotic meaning of Wolfe's death because of their private, spontaneous sympathies for him, then the only entry to be made is through the gaze of the Native American. It is he, as Robert Bromley suggested, who

> gives a new tone to the feelings, a tone to which the human race is every where a stranger, except among his tribes. It is not consternation on the view of death, it is not distress for the loss of a great leader; these he knows nothing of, for he is a savage, and a savage-warrior. Those who sustain that character in his country are known to feel an unique of composure [sic] … .He therefore sits contemplative over the event; he sits, as if he watched the awful close, that it be great[42]

This recognition that the Native American is the only figure in the painting capable of understanding the full public significance of Wolfe's victorious death would seem to further undermine West's representation of Wolfe and his mourners, as it implies a loss of public virtue as a result of the process of civilisation, here associated with the discourse of sensibility that the Native American's body has already rendered uncertain. It also, however, divides the point of entry provided by the Native American yet further, for it is not only as a savage, however noble, representing the history of all civilised peoples, that he views this scene – the suggestion in the quote from Bromley that Wolfe's death should be perceived as a Christian drama, as '*the awful close*' (a reading supported by Wolfe's posture, evidently derived from scenes of Christ taken down from the cross), is not easily reconcilable to the view of the savage-as-heathen. Instead, he can be seen to operate in an entirely different tradition, that which would align him with Dürer's *Melencolia* (Fig. 4), or with the figure of *The Thinker* more generally. As such, he possesses an intelligence, a privileged point of view, that can not easily be appropriated by the viewer.

Figure 4 Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I* (1514), reproduced by permission of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca.

Thus the figure of the Native American can be seen to embody the many divisions and contradictions of West's painting, so potentially disrupting attempts to make use of the lessons in sympathy and its unifying capacity for the nation that the painting sought to provide its audience. The Native American was to be understood as a sign of the painting's distance, both spatial and temporal,

from its viewers, even as it formed part of the circle that invited the audience to participate in a lamentation scene; as both the stuff of history and the privileged observer of that history; as both the savage Other, and the savage self out of which we have developed, bearing on his body the signs of the artificial sensibility developed by the civilised in order to replace the true public spirit, and the comprehensive view of history that it enabled, and that commercial society has rendered impossible. He is a profoundly over-determined figure, whose presence can only be accommodated by either ignoring the historical background of the painting, concentrating instead upon the moment out of time that forms the foreground, or by wholly re-writing the history that is being viewed.

IV

What, then, are we to make of all this? It is evident, first of all, that what is at issue here is not so much *whether* there was a shift from a classical form of narration, associated with civic humanist theories of art and the classical political narrative in history, to a sentimental (and later romantic) form; it appears unquestionable that this occurred, and did so in the time-scale explored by Phillips, in both written and painted history. Rather, the question to be explored is the meaning that this shift possessed for historians, painters and their audiences, and particularly the implication for history of the adoption of the kind of sentimental viewpoint that, I have suggested, though it may allow the painter to manipulate the distance between audience and image, is in fact subject to a series of debilitating divisions that throws its meaning into deep uncertainty.

Of course, writing is not painting, and the threat that faced painters who abandoned the expansive view demanded by civic humanist thought – eviction from the republic of taste, and reduction to the status of mere mechanics – could not be felt so strongly in a discipline constituted by abstractions. Yet, as my analysis of Austen suggested, the capacity for sensibility, and an interest in the particular, to disrupt the perception of reality and morality, through its abandonment of the broad, general view of things, was well-known to readers, writers and critics of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century novel.

However, the novel in fact possesses greater resources for the management of this perspectival confusion than does the history, for the fact of its evident fictional status implies an author more or less in control of the plot (however untrustworthy the novel's narrator may be).[43] There exists, then, a position from which the landscape of the novel may be known, however exclusive that position may be; in the history, however, at least within the history written in what we might describe the post-sentimental era, there is no such position. And it is the loss of this position that undermines Phillips's representation of the sentimental history as capable of providing both entertainment and instruction, even if these are understood to be divided between a gendered

audience. Capable only of providing answers for the time being, and constitutionally wedded to a body of evidence (this, after all, is the element of history that most clearly guarantees its coherence as a discipline and a genre) that limits the possibilities for sentimental embroidery, the history almost inevitably fell behind the novel and, latterly, the biography as a vehicle for truth and sentiment.

The history of history since its abandonment of the broad, general view can be depicted – admittedly with very broad brush-strokes, and in Day-Glo colours at that – as an attempt to come to terms with this loss, and to seek a resurrection of the capacity to perceive that classical narrative seemed to guarantee in one of two ways. The first involves a claim to scientific status, proven by a particular handling of evidence and a denial of history's existence as a genre of writing. Insisting upon a plain, near-transparent prose, and the unimportance of the individual historian as a producer of the history, it seeks to insinuate that an unmediated access to the past is provided for the reader, who can judge for themselves the unbiased rationality of the historian's judgements, judgements which are in any case virtually forced by the evidence. We have all heard of the death of the author – only history would seem to require the author's suicide for the greater good of the discipline.

The second, best known as the whig approach to history (but surely followed in any teleological interpretation of the past), is able, having already determined the end goal of history, to judge in a more or less uncomplicated way the distance between the present (or the correct future) and the past. Time in this survey of history is directly associated with progress (evolutionary or revolutionary); it becomes personified as itself an actor in history – '*the great innovator* TIME' – rather than an element of the historian's consciousness of the world in which he or she lives, the particular perception of which must affect their reading and writing of history.[44] Personification, as Barrell has argued in relation to William Collins's 'Ode to Evening', 'can be understood as a figure which encourages an awareness of what is common in our experience, to the exclusion of what is private or individual' – with regard to modern historiography, it can be seen to provide the historian with a position *alongside* Time, outside the flow of history, and thus apparently capable of an authoritative view upon that history.[45]

Finally, then, it is necessary to note that modern historiography, to the extent that it has developed out of the eighteenth-century discourse of sensibility, remains complicit in the appropriation of other people's stories, the better to tell its own. It is thirty-nine years since E. P. Thompson famously insisted upon the need 'to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity', in an attempt to re-direct the gaze of history to *their* histories and biographies, to the recognition that these obscure historical objects were, in fact, also historical actors.[46] Certainly the discipline has broadened the field of its gaze

since that point, not least as a result of Thompson's intervention; yet it seems unlikely that it has abandoned the position from which that view is directed, for it is only from that height that its sentimental effects may be combined with a method promising it (however falsely) an authoritative voice.

When history-painting abandoned its claim to a broad, general view, in favour of a sentimental closeness similar to that offered by portraiture, it abandoned also its claim (however exclusive it may have been) to instruct or stimulate public taste and virtue.[47] History never had to go quite so far; yet, in clinging to a function as instructor that it was increasingly incapable of combining with its new function as entertainer, it succeeded not only in losing its audience, but also in losing sight of itself *as a genre*, and of its objects of scrutiny as historical subjects in their own right. A view of the past, and the measurement of our distance from, or proximity to it, cannot only be understood as a matter of personal style, of limited importance in the truth-content of the history produced: it is, rather, constitutive of that truth, and of the evidences marshalled to prove it.

Notes

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1 M. S. Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, N. J., 2000).

2 Robert Henry's *The History of Great Britain, From the First Invasion of it by the Romans under Julius Caesar. Written On A New Plan*, 6 vols., (London, 1771–93), with its multi-layered narrative stretched across six volumes of a projected ten volume history, is surely the finest example of such ingeniousness.

3 Though it could be argued that he also provides the classic example of the failure of sentimental style, in his representation of the execution of the Countess of Salisbury: 'this venerable matron maintained still, in these distressful circumstances, the spirit of that long race of monarchs from whom she was descended [the Plantagenets]. She refused to lay her head on the block, or submit to sentence where she had received no trial. She told the executioner, that if he would have her head, he must win it the best way he could: and thus, shaking her venerable grey locks, she ran about the scaffold; and the executioner followed her with his axe, aiming many fruitless blows at her neck before he was able to give the fatal stroke.' D. Hume, *The History of England, From The Invasion Of Julius Cæsar To The End Of The Reign Of James II* (London, 1847, first published 1754–62), p. 377. The slippage from sentimental distress to grotesque black comedy displayed here was a constant danger for the sentimental historian.

4 Such at least would seem to be the implication of Phillips's earlier essay, ''If Mrs Mure be not sorry for poor King Charles': History, the Novel, and the Sentimental Reader', *History Workshop Journal* (1997), pp. 111–31.

5 Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 26. All italics in original, unless otherwise stated.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 10, fn. 11.

7 See, for example, Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, Chapters 1 and 2, or pp. 109, 202 and 212.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 42. Phillips uses H. Blair, *Lectures*, ed. H. F. Harding, 2 vols. (Carbondale, 1965).

9 J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, (London, 1993 – first published 1818).

10 *Ibid.*, p. 69, p. 20. For such commentaries, see C. Kent, 'Learning History with, and from, Jane Austen', in J. D. Grey (ed.), *Jane Austen's Beginnings: The Juvenilia and Lady Susan,* (London, 1989), pp. 59–72, as well as Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 25. S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and London, 1984), Ch. 4, are rather less concerned with maintaining history's dignity.

11 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 71.

12 'The Public Prospect and the Private View: The Politics of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain' in J. Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* (London, 1992), pp. 41–61, p. 41. See also J. Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (New Haven and London, 1986), Introduction and Ch. 1 especially, for a fuller discussion of the genres of art and their relationship to political vision and legitimacy.

13 Barrell, *Birth of Pandora*, p. 41.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

16 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 70.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

18 Letter to James Edward Austen, 16–17 December 1816, reprinted in D. Le Faye (ed.), *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford and New York, 1995), letter 146 (pp. 322–4), p. 323.

19 This, it must be stressed, is according to Reynolds's classic formulation of the art of painting, as expressed in (some of) the *Discourses*; it is by no means the only position adopted during the eighteenth century, nor even within Reynolds's own thought upon the subject. It is, however, probably the most significant position adopted with regards to the theory of art in the period. See *The Political Theory of Painting*, Ch. 1, for a fuller discussion of Reynolds's theory of art. The *Discourses* are reprinted in J. Reynolds, *The Literary Works Of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, Introduction and 'Memoir' by H. W. Beechy, 2 vols. (London, 1855).

20 J. Barrell, *Political Theory of Painting*, introduction especially: 'only sometimes does Shaftesbury seem willing to admit that those who practise in the highest genre were liberal artists' (pp. 17–18).

21 This is, of course, a rather extreme position, not truly adopted by any theorist of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, it remained a very real presence in the thinking of theorists and (some) practitioners of painting.

22 And it was particularly important that it should be so, given the British taste for portraiture and indifference for history painting. Even Reynolds relied upon portraiture for his living – to abandon it, and the other genres, to the hinterland of a false and servile taste would be wholly self-defeating.

23 A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, (Oxford, 1976, first published 1759). G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex And Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago and London, 1992), provides the classic account of the discourse of sentiment and sensibility.

24 Barrell, *Birth of Pandora*, p. 54, quoting Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 135.

25 Barrell, *Birth of Pandora*, p. 54.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

27 Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 10.

28 V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution And The English People 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1994), title of Part III. Gatrell also makes the potent point that 'the most realistic and coruscating depiction of any execution in our period was produced by a stranger to English taboos and visual language alike. Visiting England, Géricault drew a *Public hanging* in pencil and wash in 1820 … . No other depiction is as honest as this', p. 178.

29 C. Steedman, 'About ends: on the way in which the end is different from an ending', *History of the Human Sciences*, (1996), pp. 99–114; p. 105.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 107; but see also 'A Weekend with Elektra', *Literature and History*, 6:1 (1997), 17–44.

31 This reading is broadly derived from D. H. Solkin, *Painting For Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century England*, (New Haven and London, 1992), pp. 209–13.

32 E. Wind, *Hume and the Heroic Portrait*, ed. J. Anderson (Oxford, 1986), Ch. 9, 'The Revolution of History Painting'.

33 Solkin, *Painting for Money*, p. 212; E. B. Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England* (Houston, Texas, 1995), p. 79, fn. 81.

34 Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England*, p. 89, p. 79.

35 Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England*, pp. 81–84.

36 J. Robinson, *A Compleat and Impartial History Of England …*, (London, 1739), facing p. 4; J. Speed, *The history of Great Britaine under the conquests of ye Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans …*, (London, 1611); J. Owen, *A Compleat and Impartial History Of The Ancient Britons … .*, (London, 1743). A more discreetly tattooed Briton appears in J. Strutt, *The Chronicle of England … From the arrival of Julius Cæsar … to the Norman Conquest* (London, 1777), Vol. 1, facing p. 273.

37 G. Richards, *The Aboriginal Britons, A Poem* (Oxford, 1791).

38 Richards, *Aboriginal Britons*, pp. 9–10.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

40 This latter reading is half-suggested by V. G. Fryd in 'Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe*', *American Art*, 9 (1995), pp. 73–85, where she suggests that West's use of the Native American 'contributed to the development of a topos in American art in which a seated Indian chief, with chin resting on the fist of his bent arm, became codified as the Vanishing American lamenting the demise of hs race.', p. 81. However, Fryd takes this understanding rather too far, and fails to recognise both the complementary nature of the relationship between Wolfe and the Native American, and the extent to which Wolfe's identity is undermined by the Native American's presence.

41 Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England*, p. 82, referencing W. T. Whitley, *Artists and their Friends in England*, (London and Boston, 1928), I, p. 282.

42 Fryd, p. 83, quoting R. A. Bromley, *A Philosophical and Critical History of the Fine Arts* (New York, 1971 rpt, first published 1793), I, p. 59. Italics in Fryd's article.

43 There is not space here to discuss the relationship of factual and fictional narratives in the production of modern historiography, just enough to insist that the process that sees the separation of history from news and from the novel is absolutely crucial in the development of those genres and their various attitudes towards, and means of attaining, truth. See L. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, (New York, 1983); M. McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740*, (Baltimore and London, 1987); and J. P. Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-century Fiction*, (New York, 1990).

44 Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, p. 228, quoting J. Mackintosh, *Discourse on the Law of Nature and of Nations*, 3d ed. (London, 1800), pp. 53–55 (this snippet

probably p. 55); Mackintosh himself quotes Bacon, Essay XXIV, *Of Innovation*. F. Bacon, *The Works Of Lord Bacon* (London and New York, [1877?]), pp. 195–96.

45 'The Public Figure and the Private Eye: William Collins's "Ode to Evening"', in Barrell, *Birth of Pandora*, pp. 25–39; p. 36.

46 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1991, rpt. of 1980 ed., first published 1963), p. 13.

47 It began instead to instruct 'the public' in matters of taste and (private) virtue – which we, after Habermas, must know to be a very different thing indeed.

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