

INTRODUCTION

The Forgotten Language of Sentimentality

For as it is dis-location and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts.—Emerson, “The Poet,” 1844



Unlike most recent attempts to come to terms with the American sentimental tradition which focus on narrative and the novel, I have become convinced that the poetry of the nineteenth century, as a practice and as a product, deserves closer attention. After all, when Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1837 addressed the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Society with an appeal for and description of “The American Scholar,” he began by making a millennial claim for poetry: “Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole star for a thousand years” (64). To those who were not familiar with the most recent astronomical theories, it might have been possible to doubt that out of the plethora of stars crowding the zenith of the sky, one would eventually move into the lonely, fixed position of the pole star around which the rest of the galaxy revolves and by which earthly observers navigate. But it was hardly possible to “doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age,” because Emerson was only describing what many people felt and were enacting in villages and farmsteads across New England.

Although Emerson’s poet is insistently gendered male, numerous women as well as men attested to their faith in the capacity of poetry to correct the threatening “dislocation of and detachment from the life

of God" ("The Poet" 229). They did this by writing poetry in what Lois Gould of Dover, Vermont, called the "language which may never be forgot" (*Harriet Gould's Book* 2). This language, whose rules and usages have become obscured in the present century, governed more than literary expressions. In fact, as the popular sentimental poet Lydia Sigourney averred, it was understood as a fundamentally supra-verbal mode of expression.¹ The best model of what Sigourney considered the "unspoken language" of the soul occurs in the time of infancy: "The mother speaks it well / To the unfolding spirit of her babe" ("Unspoken Language" 19–20). Verbal and material expressions of the language of sentiment, such as poetry or embroidery, were seen as imperfect but useful approximations of this originary language. For us, they may serve as traces of a fundamental construct through which nineteenth-century Americans made sense of themselves.² If, as Emerson explains in "The Poet," "words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words," then the popular poetry of nineteenth-century America should provide a decipherable index to the dynamics of American culture (225).³

The poetry that "flamed at the zenith" of America's literary culture in the years between the War of 1812 and the end of the Reconstruction period forces a confrontation between conventional notions of sentimentalism and conventional notions of the history of American literature. The many poets writing what has been dismissed as "sentimental" and inconsequential poetry were engaged in what Emerson considered the urgent work of "reattaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature" and thereby healing the "dislocation and detachment" of man from God ("The Poet" 229).⁴ Their engagement deserves reevaluation, as it both affected the cultural parameters of the nineteenth-century American world and shaped the aesthetic expectations of later Americans.⁵ Just as much as Emerson, the readers, writers, buyers, and givers of sentimental poetry were actively calling into being "the pole star" to a "new age" of America. The new age of nineteenth-century America became the age for themselves, the American middle class. "Events, actions arise," claims Emerson, "that must be sung, that will be sung" ("American Scholar" 64). I will be arguing that the events and actions shaping what it meant to be an American were being sung in a key set by the poetics of sentimentality. The nature of this poetics

has remained elusive despite much excellent recent work on the sentimental or domestic novel. The poetics of sentimentality is best revealed by attention to quotidian verse that celebrates not the sublime, the individual, and the possibility of dissent, but the domestic, the familial, and the possibility of consent.

In this way the sentimental mode can be seen as the functional aspect of the American Romantic movement, the aspect that enables the widespread diffusion of Romantic sensibilities through a culture invested in imagining itself as a cohesive, integral whole.⁶ Imagine, for a moment, the exclusion of Wordsworth's Lucy poems from considerations of the British Romantic period because of their focus on the ordinary, the domestic, or on loss, and you have imagined the nature of the gap that currently exists in conventional studies of American Romanticism.⁷ A manuscript album of poetry that my mother-in-law shared with me several years ago offers an occasion to begin to address this problem. Taken as a whole this manuscript (*Harriet Gould's Book*) is one of the fullest examples of the give and take, the circulation, of affections that characterizes, for me, the culture-building power of sentimental discourse. It provides a model for reexamining some of the key assumptions of American studies, including the role of women and other marginal individuals in the creation of what it means to be an American. In the first part of this study, I derive a theoretical and formal understanding of the language of sentiment from a close examination of this manuscript and its provenance. Sentiment, I argue, structures a collaboration through which individuals can join together in solving the seemingly local problem of grief in the face of death. The poems in *Harriet Gould's Book* trace the way that hardscrabble farmers deployed poetry in an economy of sentimental artifacts through which they were able to define and claim the center of cultural power as they defined and laid claim to a revolutionary, new sense of self.

But these poems also suggest the degree to which this collaborated American subject must betray itself. The successful, utopian solutions of certain problems of loss, themselves, lead to violent disintegrations of the very structures they have set into place. For, after all, the term "collaboration" is uncanny. As the *American Heritage Dictionary* explains, it means both "to join together in a joint intellectual project" and "to cooperate

with the enemy.” Sentimental collaboration works, I show in the three remaining parts of the book, to construct a particularly American form of personal subjectivity, national subjectivity, and aesthetic subjectivity. These forms of subjectivity, I argue, result from the simultaneous participation in joint intellectual projects and in treasonous cooperations. To understand the contradictory aspects of sentimentality is to understand the contradictory aspects of American consciousness.

Before going on to introduce the chapters of this book in any detail, I’d like to offer a brief discussion of one of the untitled mourning poems of *Harriet Gould’s Book*:⁸

Oh can it be that Wayland’s dead
 My lovely darling son
 Oh can it be his soul has fled
 To its eternal home.

How sad how very sad the hour
 That bore him far away
 Oh ne’er while memory holds her seat
 Shall I forget that day.

But deeper sadder is the gloom
 That rests on all around
 As one by one the days move on
 In their appointed rounds,

And still my babe returns no more
 To cheer my aching heart
 The silken ties that bound him there
 Have all been torn apart.

How can I check the falling tear
 How can I hush the sigh
 Dear Savior let me ever feel
 Thy grace and presence nigh

I know my boy though lost to me
 Has reached the blissful shore
 The soul divested of its clay
 Can sing its suffering o’er

He's safely housed from every storm,
 Secure on Jesus' breast.
 O may we strive to meet him there
 And share his blissful rest.

And while we tread the toilsome way,
 Which oft is dark and drear
 We know that both our darling boys
 Are safe from grief and fear.

And if to God we faithful prove,
 And act the Christian part
 We'll join them in that world above
 Where we shall never part.

(Abigail Gould Howe III)

To those in the midst of Emerson's "shop, the plough, and the ledger" or, in the case of women poets such as Abigail Howe, the kitchen, the farmyard, and the nursery, the mode of sentimentality provided a means of confronting the philosophical problem of skepticism posed by the experience of loss. Grief drives such characteristically sentimental assertions of hope and benevolence as: "I know my boy though lost to me / Has reached the blissful shore." This claim made by Abigail Gould Howe in a poem written on the death of one of her sons is really an answer to a repeatedly posed spiritual skepticism, an answer she comes to only with difficulty. The dominant mood of Abigail Howe's mourning poem is interrogative. She begins with an exclamation of bereftness:

Oh can it be that Wayland's dead
 My lovely darling son
 Oh can it be his soul has fled
 To its eternal home.

In the middle of the poem she describes the physical manifestations of her continued grief as she seeks a method to achieve solace: "How can I check the falling tear / How can I hush the sigh."

The solution to her grief is posited in a vision of the reunification of the family after death:

He's safely housed from every storm,
 Secure on Jesus' breast.
 O may we strive to meet him there
 And share his blissful rest.

Abigail Howe's mourning poem for her son Wayland suggests that the distinguishing function of the poetics of sentimentality is the same as that claimed by Emerson for the poet: to reattach symbolic connections that have been severed by the contingencies of human existence. This is the utopian promise that wielded great ideological effect. Her poem, an imaginative construction, is a medium for the restoration of "the silken ties that bound him" to her heart that had "all been torn apart." It is also a chance to imagine the bonds between herself and her child as different than they really were: as eternal, not temporary; as necessary, not arbitrary. This act of conservation is essentially generative; the symbolic work of imagining a replacement also provides for the symbolic re-production of that which is considered original or authentic.⁹

The replacement family that Abigail Howe imagines for her dead child and for herself is superior to the one that has been actually lost. Wayland shall be "housed from every storm" upon "Jesus' breast." The "world above / Where we shall never part" is a world in which the earthly hierarchy between parent and child will be subsumed if Abigail should be able to join her son within the heavenly domestic space dominated by the parental Jesus. Abigail Howe's use of conditionals, "*may we strive*," "*if to God*," "*We'll join them*," at the close of this poem undercuts the confidence she has expressed in the middle of the poem when she claims: "I know my boy though lost to me / Has reached the blissful shore" or "We know that both our darling boys / Are safe from grief and fear." The subjunctive leaves open the possibility that the conditions of loss might continue, that there will be no reconstitution of the family or healing of the loss and that Abigail will never find a way "to check the falling tear" or "hush the sigh." In the process of addressing the problem of grief in this poem, one of eight dealing directly with infant death by several women from the Dover community, Abigail is able to displace the "I" whose isolated pain dominates the first twenty-six lines of the poem with the "we" of the concluding ten lines. It is in the voice of this "we," a joint self composed of herself and her husband, that Abigail is able to imag-

ine (if only conditionally) a utopian resolution to her personal doubts. In other words, Abigail Gould Howe's poem for Wayland addresses the challenge of her own experience of grief in the language of sentiment.

In part I of what follows, I lay out the formal components of this "language which may never be forgot" in terms of its grammar and lexicon. Writers such as Abigail Gould Howe used these formal elements as a means of transforming their grief into restorative mourning, skepticism into optimism. My readings of this manuscript are meant to provide a theoretical foundation for my overall treatment of sentimental culture, which moves from vernacular texts, as here, to works of former and present canonical status and a historical foundation for a study that spans across the years from the formation of antebellum American culture through the aftermath of the Civil War. The first chapter, "*Harriet Gould's Book: Description and Provenance*," introduces the reader to the widespread cultural practice of sentimental collaboration in the early nineteenth century through a "thick description" of *Harriet Gould's Book*, which situates the manuscript at the nexus of several contexts: historical, political, and aesthetic. The second chapter, "We Shore These Fragments against Our Ruin," provides a close analysis of the poetics governing the individual poems and the manuscript as a whole. I lay the ground work, here, for understanding sentimentality as a discursive mode that transcends the boundaries of genre and performs its specific cultural work through a shared set of formal features.

The second part, "Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and the American Self," focuses on sentimentality's role in the construction of a personal subjectivity that was not at odds with, but a necessary condition of, community. Both chapters depend on an interdisciplinary framework that harnesses the methodology of anthropology and sociology to the interpretative power of formal literary analysis. Both are concerned with the paradoxical way that the mode of sentimentality inflects particular genres in different ways; where the lyric gains the novel-like capacity to move through time and to encompass multiple voices, the novel gains the lyric-like capacity to open up one moment of time and to collapse heteroglossia into monologia. In chapter 3, "And Sister Sing the Song I Love': The Economy of Self and Other in the Stasis of Lyric," I continue my discussion of *Harriet Gould's Book* to argue that these lyrics are the traces of a symbolic economy. Through the circulation of these traces,

the participants in this economy construct and maintain a collaborative sense of personal identity. Such collaborative individualism (for want of a better term) is the necessary correlative to the more commonly studied possessive individual often thought to be at the heart of liberal society. Chapter 4 turns to the novel to find more fully rendered descriptions of what this economy of sentiment might have looked like. In “Circulation of the Dead and the Making of the Self in the Novel” I use a model of reading suggested by the archival poems of *Harriet Gould’s Book* to explore two paradigmatically sentimental novels: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar*. Each depicts the formation of sentimental collaborations between characters, and each seeks to engage its readers in collaborations through the deployment of sentiment. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the collaborative subject results from the circulation of dead children; in *The Gates Ajar* this subject derives from the circulation of dead men.

The third part, “The Competition of Sentimental Nationalisms: Lydia Sigourney and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” describes the way that these two seemingly very different poets used the collaborative potential of sentimentality to formulate definitions of “America” and “Americans” in sentimental terms. I contrast the success of these typically sentimental poets to define these concepts with the effort of earlier poet Joel Barlow, who had offered a neo-classic vision of America in the form of an epic. In chapter 5, “The Competition of Sentimental Nationalisms,” I describe the way that each of these nineteenth-century poets relied on the increasingly popular aesthetics of sentimentality to carve out a new career path as a professional poet that was part of their effort to define the American subject. However, the different sentimental Americas generated by each reveals the critical inflections of gender carried by an ubiquitous American sentimentality. In Chapter 6, “The Other American Poets,” I argue that, having secured themselves as American poets, Sigourney and Longfellow anticipate and try to counter the threats to the integrity of their sentimental Americas. Both poets inoculate their nationalist projects against what they imagined is the worst threat—the threat of disunion—by using the rhetorical strategies of sentimentality to coerce their readers into joining with them in the articulation of a shared vision of America. Neither they, nor the political figures such as Abraham Lincoln who shared their vision of a sentimental America, could

have realized the degree to which sentimental solutions to the problems facing the nation were not only inadequate but were actually partaking of the same structures generating this strife.

This was, however, clear to many after the war. Mark Twain, nostalgically celebrating the antebellum culture of his youth during the politically traumatic but personally triumphant Reconstruction years, suggests this connection in his two reconstruction era “boys’ books,” *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the final part, “Mourning Sentimentality in Reconstruction-Era America: Mark Twain’s Nostalgic Realism,” I argue for a reevaluation of Twain’s relationship both to the culture of sentiment and to its aesthetic expressions. In chapter 7, “Invoking the Bonds of Affection: *Tom Sawyer* and America’s Morning,” I contextualize Twain’s vexed relationship to sentimentality within a broader contemporary cultural debate about the efficacy of sentimentality as a mode of rhetoric. Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*, like Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, bespeaks a continued faith in the ability of sentiment to solve the political problems of the perpetuation and reproduction of the promises of America. Yet, I go on to suggest in chapter 8, “Mourning America’s Morning: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” that *Huck Finn* interrogates the degree to which sentimentality undermines its own promises while refusing to repudiate those promises. Seen in this light, both Twain’s continued reliance on sentimentality and his role in the development of what have come to seem as the counterstrategies of realism are part of a lifelong effort to solve the problems of a sentimental culture. Twain’s “realism,” then, is a reformative gesture meant to restore the potential of literature as a vehicle for the construction of the necessary connections among people through the circulation of authentic affections.

Each of the last three parts is concerned with a particular function of sentimental collaboration: what kind of self, what kind of nation, and what kind of art was called into being through the efficacy of the “language which may never be forgot”? Working together on these questions, as a joint project, was itself one of the ways that a cohesive group identity encompassing and defining the American middle class began to emerge during this era. Each of the parts of this book examines the way that the ideological force of sentimental discourse in American culture arises from the promise of utopian community as an answer to particu-

lar threats of loss and alienation. The members of Harriet Gould's rural community model this ideological force as they address the seemingly local and individual problem of parental grief by forging closer reciprocal ties among the larger group of the community. They left traces of this in the form of poetry, memoirs, gravestones, and mourning art. But so did many more famous Americans, such as Emerson, Stowe, Phelps, Sigourney, Longfellow, Lincoln, and Twain, when they used the radically conserving power of sentimental collaboration to reconfigure loss as gain in their own lives and work.