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Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture

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Sentimentality and Social Pluralism in American Literature

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I.

The word *sentimentality* implies two particular transgressions against the modern sensibility: emotional excess and falsification of reality. When the concept of sentimentality got its start back in the 18th century, those two lapses from good taste were especially identified with the rise to prominence of a newly prosperous middle class which needed its own mode of literature to express its particular aspirations and grievances. Writers like Defoe and Richardson tapped into a huge reservoir of hitherto unexpressed public feeling by weaving fantasies about middle class economic and social penetration into hereditary aristocracy.

Given that background, we may perceive something of a *déjà-vu* effect in our view of American sentimentality. Just as the rise of a literate middle class gave birth to sentimental classics like *The London Merchant* and *Pamela* in 18th century England, so a burgeoning middle class in America provided a mass market a century later for novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Horatio Alger series. And in both countries the reaction against these clumsy expressions of bourgeois protest and aspiration came from aristocrats of birth or intellect whose command of tone and form at once marked them as literary masters. Pope's wit, Swift's irony, and Fielding's comic suavity formed a prophylaxis against the sentimental mode that found an analogue of sorts in the aesthetic discipline of Henry James, the unrelenting irony of Henry Adams, and the subtle wit and paradox of Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson.
Yet, despite the *déjà-vu* quality that may be thought to carry over from the British literary heritage to the American, the cultural plurality of America has made it, rather than Britain, the more likely site for a resurgence of sentimentality. This likelihood rests upon two premises that this paper proposes to amplify: first, that the anti-sentimental stance is essentially a feature of the dominant WASP culture (*WASP* = White Anglo-Saxon Protestant); and second, that in the United States the pervasive influence of non-WASP subcultures (Jewish, Black, Hispanic, Catholic) enabled sentimental literature to mount an immediate and formidable comeback against the WASP repression. Even during the high Modern Period in America--roughly the decades from World War I to the end of World War II--when the anti-sentimental mode held dominance in the world of serious literature, a subversive movement toward a new romanticism was preparing the way for the anti-Modern rebellion of the 1950's, when writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Robert Lowell would tear away the protective shield from their (and our) contemporary sensibilities.

II.

Because the non-WASP subcultures of America occupy so large a place in my argument, I should begin by describing the ethnic diversity that characterized my home region of central Massachusetts--a representative American social scene. In and around my home city of Worcester, which numbered about 200,000 people, we had ethnic neighborhoods, each with its own distinctive churches, restaurants, and cultural traditions, that were variously populated by Lithuanians, Poles, Swedes, Jews, Italians, Armenians, Greeks, French, Irish, Finns, Dutch, Syrians, and Negroes. In fact, we even had enough Albanians in town to sponsor, every Sunday, a program of music called "The Albanian Hour." And more recently, by reason of immigration from Asia and from Hispanic America, a still larger ethnic mix has been coming on, notably adding to our local cuisine restaurants with Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese specialties. Simply by virtue of attending the same school together, young Americans have been reared with a greater likelihood
of immediate neighborly contact with other subcultures than would be likely in most other nations.

At the center of those various subcultures, though realized only half-consciously by their participants, we may normally find a key linguistic construct that—for lack of a better term—I shall call that culture's "soul-word." I draw that term from America's black subculture, whose soul-word is soul itself. To have soul is to have a profound emotional sensibility—which obviously relates in some way to our theme of sentimentality. Other soul-words that I have garnered from various American subcultures include the Armenian genutzat ("I give you everything I have": an ethos necessary to communal survival for a much-persecuted people); the Japanese yamato-damashi ("Don't come back until the job is done": an ethos that kept some Japanese soldiers still fighting in the jungles of Southeast Asia thirty years after the war was over); the Finnish sisu (a refusal to acknowledge pain: as can be witnessed by those Finns who take a steam bath and roll in the snow afterwards); and the Jewish l'chaim!, or "To Life!" (an ethos that defies the bloody persecutions that have hounded God's Chosen People since Roman times). And for the once-dominant WASP subculture of America, the soul-word is class as in the phrase, "He's got class." In the ensuing discussion, I shall focus particularly on the WASP, Jewish, and Black subcultures in American literature, with a side glance at the role of gender as an influence on our literary culture.

III.

The word class, like all soul-words, is a finally indefinable but crucial indicator of what the cultural group most envies, admires, and hopes to attain. To have class means two things above all else: having dignity, and equally important, allowing other people to have their dignity. As the word implies, there is also a competitive ethos implied in having class: to be a high-class person is to achieve a special distinction that marks one off from the ordinary. Hemingway's famous formulation, "grace under pressure," is a good instance of this competitive struggle for distinction. In his work, the grace—or "class"—of the Hemingway hero comes in
proportion to the magnitude of the pressure, which often is the immin- lent nearness of death. Hemingway's bullfighters or hunters—as in *The Sun Also Rises* and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"—are the best specimens of ultimate grace displaying itself against this ultimate pressure.

For those of us who may fall short of that ultimate display of *class*, Hemingway provides a more modest path toward the WASP ideal in his short story, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place." Here the threat to keeping one's composure is not death, but the thought of death—the "nada" that makes the older writer an insomniac. This character not only has dignity in his battle against dread, he also demonstrates the WASP ideal of letting other people have their dignity when he defends the deaf old man in the café from the younger waiter's contempt:

"I wouldn't want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing."
[says the younger waiter]

"Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him." [says the older waiter]

For one other modern instance of the WASP code, I turn our greatest American novelist (in my opinion), William Faulkner. This example of the WASP stress on dignity—both having it and arranging to let others have it—occurs in a scene from *As I Lay Dying*. Here a passing Negro has responded to the stench of Addie's corpse with an expletive: "Great God. What they got in that wagon?" Jewel's expletive in reply—"Son of a bitch"—is overheard by a different stranger, a white man who takes out a knife: "[...] cant no man call me that."

Darl's skillful intervention to prevent violence concludes with an elaborate refinement of the WASP code of dignity:

"Hush" I say [to Jewel]. "Tell him you didn't mean it."

"I didn't mean it," Jewel says.

"He better not," the man says. "Calling me a--"

"Do you think he's afraid to call you that?" I say.

The man looks at me. "I never said that," he says.

"Dont think it, neither," Jewel says.

I have lingered over these instances of the WASP code of dignity because it has played a vital role in the suppression of what we call sentimentality. The code becomes most prominently visible when it is violated by unwitting non-WASP characters. Early on in *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, Jake Barnes tries his best to instruct his Jewish friend Robert Cohn in the necessity for emotional repression. The secret of WASP conversation, he tries to say, is not to talk too much, especially about oneself and most especially of all about one’s unhappy feelings. As a non-WASP, Cohn does not understand the code he is being judged by, and so he keeps jabbering along on the taboo subject of fear and regret:

"Listen, Jake," he leaned forward on the bar. "Don't you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it? Do you realize you've lived nearly half the time you have to live already?"

"Yes, every once in a while."

"Do you know that in about thirty-five years more we'll be dead?"

"What the hell, Robert," I said. "What the hell."\(^3\)

It is interesting to note that Robert Cohn's speech in this instance is an expression of the Jewish *l'chaim* principle, the hunger to live all he can while the opportunity offers. His problem is not that he has this wish to live his life to the hilt before he dies, his problem is that he expresses it. Jake of course has the same wish, but he follows the WASP imperative of reticence. A real man realizes his life in action, not in words. To talk too much is to have no dignity, no *class*.

Later, Robert Cohn compounds his transgression against WASP dignity when he allows his unhappiness over Brett's rejection of him to have open, public expression. To Jake's disgust, Cohn cries in public, whereas Jake, with much more reason to cry over Lady Brett, cries only when he is alone at night. Not being a WASP, Cohn simply does not understand the importance of always having dignity in public. He has never learned the code of not talking too much, and of having emotional discipline amongst one's fellows.
Behind Hemingway stands a WASP tradition of emotional repression going back into the American Renaissance. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, vehemently renounced emotional self-exposure in his work, declaring in his preface to "The Old Manse" that "So far as I am a man of really individual attributes I veil my face; nor am I, nor have I ever been, one of those supremely hospitable people who serve up their own hearts, delicately fried, with brain sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public." Emily Dickinson, too, displayed this WASP habit of emotional reticence, most obviously by not publishing her poetry, but also—to judge from her letters—in her private life. Her life's grand love object, the Reverend Charles Wordsworth, evidently reproved her for not telling him her deepest feelings; her reply, in the "Dear Master" letters, centers upon a striking metaphor of dangerously repressed passions: "You say I do not tell you all. Vesuvius don't talk, Etna don't. One of them said a syllable a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it and hid forever."

Another keeper of the WASP veil of emotional reticence was Robert Frost, who declared his poetic creed as follows:

I'd impose it as a penalty on you that you shouldn't wax literary on what you've been through, or turn it to account in any way. It must be kept way down under the surface where you must confine yourself to everything else in the world but your own personal experience.

And in another letter Frost declared that "We shall be judged finally by the delicacy of our feeling of where to stop short [...]. There is no greater fallacy going than that art is expression—an undertaking to tell all to the last scrapings of the brain pan."

From there, it is just a short step to the Pound-Eliot revolution in modern poetry, which for our purposes we may summarize in T. S. Eliot's dictum, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion; it is an escape from emotion [...] it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." And it was Ezra Pound who, in his Imagist manifesto in the March 1913 Poetry magazine, described how best to achieve this ideal of emotional
discipline in poetry: "The image has been defined as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.'"9 That is to say, the expression of emotion hereafter would be fused with the power of the intellect, and both emotion and intellect would ideally be confined within the field of the image rather than given direct and primary expression.

The culminating practitioner of this WASP code of emotional discipline was, in my opinion, Eliot's and Pound's contemporary, Wallace Stevens, whose poems are typically freighted with hundreds of images of the type Pound called for, generally under the governance of the dispassionate stance we associate with William Butler Yeats's epitaph, "Cast a cold eye. / Horseman, pass by."10 "The Emperor of Ice Cream" is a good representation of this attitude, with its hedonistic appeal to the senses in the first stanza (cigars, flowers, "concupiscent curds") deliberately augmented by the woman's funeral in the second stanza. "Let the lamp affix its beam" [which I take to be the lamp of the undertaker at his work]. / "The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream."11

Turning from these WASP poets to WASP prose writers, we may likewise trace Hemingway's anti-sentimental stance back to WASP precursors. Perhaps the most notorious denial of personal feeling occurs in The Education of Henry Adams, that intellectual autobiography whose author omitted not only any mention of his beloved wife's suicide but all mention of her existence: as though their marriage had contributed nothing to the education of Henry Adams. In this book Adams attained the ideal that T. S. Eliot only strove after: an escape from emotion, a protective mask over the personality.

The American writer whom Hemingway most admired, Mark Twain, stated his abomination of sentimentality regarding both the mode of emotional excess and the mode of falsifying reality. His hatred of emotional excess is typified in a letter to his friend J. H. Burroughs, dated November 1, 1876: "There is one thing which I can't stand, and won't stand from many people. That is sham sentimentality--the kind a school-girl puts into her graduating composition [...]. It gives me the bowel complaint."12 Twain's most notable artistic rendering of this theme is of course the scene in the Grangerford's parlor in Huckleberry
Finn, which displays young Emily Grangerford's drawings like that of "a young lady [...] [who] was crying into a handkerchief and had a dead bird laying in her other hand with its heels up, and underneath the picture it said "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas.""

In so far as it falsified reality, Twain blamed sentimentality for having caused the greatest tragedy in American public life, the Civil War. As embodied in the medieval romances of Walter Scott, sentimentality fatally deformed the mind of the South, according to Twain's Life on the Mississippi:

The South has not yet recovered from the debilitating influence of his books [...]. Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments [...] sets the world in love with [...] the silliness and emptiness, sham gauds, sham grandeurs, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote [...]. Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war.

Apart from Twain, other contributors to the realist movement in American fiction also saw their role as that of cleansing the inherited genteel tradition of both its emotional excess and its propensity to falsify reality. Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis are other WASP novelists who relied heavily on the purgative effects of irony to achieve these anti-sentimental objectives. Later in the 20th century, the anti-sentimental bias culminated in the most emotionally repressive of all fictional forms to date, the black humor mode.
Although we associate the black humor mode in America primarily with fiction, I think the most succinct rationale for this mode of literature may be found in the words of a poet we have already mentioned, Robert Frost, when he pronounced an obituary tribute to his fellow New England WASP poet Edwin Arlington Robinson:

[Robinson's] much-admired restraint lies wholly in never having let grief go further than it could in play. So far shall grief go, so far shall philosophy go, so far shall confidences go, and no further. Taste may set the limit [...]. Give us immedicable woes-- woes that nothing can be done for-- woes flat and final. And then to play. The play's the thing. Play's the thing.  

Making play--or even laughter--out of grief became in time the basis of the black humor movement, which emerged after World War II as perhaps the primary innovation affecting American fiction. Nathanael West, America's greatest precursor of the black humor movement in fiction, stated his rationale for this anti-sentimental strategy in his first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931). "What is more tragic than the role of the clown?" he asks in this novel, which proceeds to define the role of laughter as a last defense against psychic pain: "I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is 'bitter,' I must laugh at the laugh."  

It is significant, I think, that the black humor movement that West epitomized is essentially a WASP invention. It is true that West himself was Jewish by birth, but after he was excluded from his preferred fraternity at Brown University because of his Jewish blood, he did everything in his power to anglicize himself, changing his name from Nathan Weinstein to Nathanael West and getting engaged to a Roman Catholic girlfriend. (He eventually married a different Roman Catholic girlfriend.) He also used the tough-minded WASP persona in his books, like Shrike in Miss Lonelyhearts and Beagle Darwin in The Dream Life of Balso Snell, to crush with ridicule the sentimental protagonist like Miss Lonelyhearts.
Other WASP practitioners of black humor date back to familiar names like Poe and Melville (most notably *The Confidence-Man*), the later Mark Twain (with his "pen dipped in hell"), and Ambrose Bierce. In recent times, black humor evokes names like Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner (in *As I Lay Dying*), Vladimir Nabokov, John Hawkes, and John Barth. Jack Burden, the central character in Robert Penn Warren's classic novel *All the King's Men* (1946), is an exemplary instance of the corrosive black humor sensibility up to the point, three-quarters through the narrative, where he undergoes a transformation of his personality. It turns out that his wise-guy toughness of tone is only a mask for the real personality, which emerges only after he learns he has unwittingly caused his father's suicide. Then, for the first time allowing himself to express sentimental feeling, he says, "I found that I [...] was weeping [...]. It was like the ice breaking up after a long winter. And the winter had been long."¹⁷

VI.

In a sense, the winter had also been long for American literature during its half-century of subservience to the repressive, anti-sentimental mode. Nonetheless, it is notable that, true to its sentimental origins in 18th century England, the American novel maintained a subversive streak of sentimental expression even during this WASP-dominated era. The popular women writers, for one thing, maintained an enormous reading audience contemporaneous with the productions of Hawthorne, James, and Faulkner. As successful as *The Scarlet Letter* was in 1850, as the first true novel in American letters, its readership was meager compared with that engendered by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* two years later. And the sale of Faulkner's greatest masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* in its first year amounted to 7000 copies, as compared with that other epic of the Old South published the same year (1936), *Gone With the Wind*, which sold over a million copies in the year of its appearing. A similar profile applies to other sentimental best-sellers at the height of the Modern period, such as Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. So clearly, the "ironic anti-sentimental" mode was fail-
ing to meet the psychic needs of a huge portion of the middle-class reading audience.

Moreover, the subversive streak of sentimental literature co-existing with the dominant ironic mode displays itself not only in sentimentalists like Margaret Mitchell and John Steinbeck but also within the writings of the anti-sentimental masters. Mark Twain, for example, considered his own favorite book among his own works to be not *Huckleberry Finn* but *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, his most maudlin, sentimentalized work of fiction. Likewise Theodore Dreiser, the most uncompromising social realist of his day in American fiction, also published some remarkably sentimental poetry, including the verses to an immensely popular song based on his childhood, "On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away." Ernest Hemingway, the very archetype of WASP emotional reticence and tough-minded realism, as we have noted, betrayed a sentimental streak in his 1930s novel *To Have and Have Not*, which fell into a caricature about the struggle between rich and poor people, and he later collapsed ignominiously into self-pity and other forms of emotional excess in *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950). Even William Faulkner, the supreme genius of modern American fiction, wrote with grossly sentimental exaggeration of feeling in *Pylon*, a novel whose subject was simply too close to his own fantasy life as a daredevil pilot in a flying circus.

The same phenomenon applies to our best modern poets. Several major figures in modern American poetry, such as E. E. Cummings and Hart Crane, simply ignored the ironic, anti-sentimental attitude prevalent in their time, and wrote directly out of spontaneous happiness. "I believe I have it in me to become the greatest singer of my generation," Hart Crane wrote in 1923, the year after the publication of *The Waste Land*. Although Crane acknowledged the dominance of the Eliotic attitude at the time, he deliberately set himself in defiance against it:

I take Eliot as a point of departure towards an almost complete reversal of direction [...]. I feel that Eliot ignores certain spiritual events and possibilities as real and powerful now as, say, in the time of Blake [...]. The poetry of negation is beautiful, but one *does* have joys.
For all his effort to escape emotion and personality, T. S. Eliot himself in the end betrayed a sentimental undercurrent in his verse which at times threatened to sabotage his ingenious techniques of emotional concealment. His pervasive irony, his sophisticated allusions, his indirect statement of feeling through image and persona— all these devices failed to free his poetry from either his anguish related to his bad marriage or his overpowering religious hunger. In the end, a generation ahead of Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell, Eliot became literally (as in *Ash-Wednesday*) a confessional poet—which is by definition a supremely sentimental mode of literary expression.

But still, though the ironic mode contained (we may say) these seeds of its own destruction, it remained for non-WASP outsiders to overthrow completely the modern ethos of emotional discipline in favor of freely sentimental expression. I shall briefly discuss the revolutionary effect of three such outsiders—a Hispanic, a Black, and a Jew.

VII.

The Hispanic is William Carlos Williams, whom I call Hispanic because of his mother’s Puerto Rican ancestry. (Hence the middle name Carlos; Williams’ father was an Englishman.) As the child of an immigrant family in the New York City area, Williams was removed from the WASP mainstream that we associate with Hemingway, Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. He was also an outsider literarily in that his full-time profession as a doctor left him no time to develop the literary sophistication of Eliot, Pound, or Stevens. In fact, his life as a doctor imposed on him his characteristic poetic form: the short, unrhymed "snapshot" image. As his *Autobiography* describes it, longer poems were not possible until his retirement gave him the leisure:

Five minutes, ten minutes, can always be found. I had my typewriter in my office desk [...]. I worked at top speed. If a patient came in at the door while I was in the middle of a sentence, bang would go the machine—I was a physician [...]. Finally, after eleven at night, when the last patient
had been put to bed, I could always find the time to bang out ten or twelve pages.\textsuperscript{20}

Not only this casual manner of composition but the substance of Williams' poetry also represented a direct contrast to the poetry of modernist practitioners like Eliot. Even more than Hart Crane, Williams declared an antipathy to Eliot's high-brow pessimism: "I had a violent feeling that Eliot betrayed what I believe in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward."\textsuperscript{21} As it turned out, Williams was a reliable prophet; and what he was looking forward to (we may now see in hindsight) was a new sentimentality. Perhaps a few verses from a typical Williams poem, chosen at random, will refresh the memories of my readers about the kind of sentimentality Williams brought back to respectability:

\begin{verbatim}
TO A POOR OLD WOMAN
munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her
\end{verbatim}
In the 1950s, the poets who deposed Eliot from his poetic throne—poets like Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Lowell—declared expressly that they owed their greatest debt to the example of William Carlos Williams. And Williams himself, in describing the creed of this anti-modern movement, used (I think) the most perfect phrase anyone has yet formulated to describe what this new poetry was all about. It was, Williams said, "the expression of democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form."²² That, I should say, is equally as perfect a definition of sentimentality as it is of the new poetry: sentimentality is also "a democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form."

America's black writers have also opened the mode of fiction to a resurgence of sentimentality. Although Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison's classic novel of 1952, maintained the formal discipline that we associate with WASP modernism, other black writers have followed the dictates of the soul ethos with absolute candor. James Baldwin, for one, openly portrayed his religious and (homo)sexual initiations in books like Go Tell It on the Mountain and Another Country a generation ago, just as Alice Walker has portrayed her sexual and religious initiations with similar emotional candor more recently in The Color Purple. Perhaps the most vigorous claim of a black writer to absolute freedom of emotional expression came from LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), who made a statement of purpose in his novel entitled The System of Dante's Hell that blew the old proprieties to smithereens once and for all. The purpose of this book (LeRoi Jones said to his presumably white reader) "is to jam your face in my shit."²³ The questions of emotional excess and of formal discipline seem quite irrelevant once a reader has worked past that statement.

Because having soul implies the possession of a supremely sensitive emotional sensibility, it automatically evokes the idea of sentimental feeling. One of the literary problems that black writers have evidenced is that having soul--unlike having class, for example--is an ultimately inexpressible condition. That is to say, having soul is inexpressible in language, or words. It is expressible, however, in music, which—in the form of jazz, the blues, ragtime, gospel singing, and rock'n'roll—has become the great artistic contribution of Black America to national and international popular culture. The best literary descriptions of soul,
therefore, have tended to be descriptions of black music, as in the following two examples from *The Bluest Eye*, a novel by the black woman writer Toni Morrison. In the first instance, a girl describes the profound emotional resonance a young girl derives from hearing her mother singing the blues:

If mother was in a singing mood [...] she would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without "a thin dime to my name." I looked forward to the delicious time when "my man" would leave me, when I would "hate to see that evening sun go down [...]" 'cause then I would know "my man has left this town." Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.²⁴

The black male's version of this soul-music occurs later in this same novel, when an even deeper emotional resonance arises from music played on instruments, without words:

The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life [...] and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and [...] [in] its final and pervading ache of freedom. Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free [...]. Free to feel whatever he felt--fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity.²⁵

With that string of emotional states related to the soul ethos, we are clearly far removed from the avoidance of emotion that typified the WASP-dominated high Modern Period.

Having looked at Black and Hispanic rebels against the WASP literary hegemony, I conclude with an instance of the Jewish contribution. My example will be the most eminent Jewish-American writer, Nobel-Prize winning novelist Saul Bellow, who straddles the period
between the end of Modernism (1940s and 1950s) and the present. As we look at Bellow's earlier fiction, we can understand more clearly why Robert Cohn violated Hemingway's WASP code of emotional reticence in *The Sun Also Rises*. Derived from a people whose most sacred object is called the "Wailing Wall," Bellow's Jewish protagonists have no qualms whatever about pouring out their deepest griefs in public. At the end of *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm weeps copiously in public over the funeral of a passing stranger; and in *Henderson the Rain King*, Henderson (though allegedly a WASP) betrays his Jewish ethos by taking pleasure in his embodiment of the "Suffering Jew" archetype: "Gene," his wife tells him, "when you suffer you suffer harder than any person I ever saw." And later, Henderson admits, "I *was* monstrously proud of my suffering. I thought there was nobody in the world that could suffer like me."26

The sentimentalism of this ethos finds free expression during Henderson's stay in Africa, when he compresses the long Jewish tradition of lamentation into his act of impersonating a lion for the native king:

And so I was the beast. I gave myself to it, and all my sorrow came out in the roaring. My lungs supplied the air but the note came from my soul [...] a cry which summarized my entire course on this earth, from birth to Africa; and certain words crept into my roars, like [...] 'De profoooondis,' plus snatches from the 'Messiah' (He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, etcetera).27

When this "Suffering Jew" profile runs into conflict with the *l'chaim* principle, however, it is the latter principle of affirmation that prevails, as the African priestess tells Henderson by way of interpreting his memory of early childhood:

It is very early in life, and I am out in the grass. The sun flames and swells; the heat it emits is its love, too. I have this self-same vividness in my heart. There are dandelions [...] I put my love-swollen cheek to the yellow of the dandelions. I try to enter the green. Then she told me I had grun-tu-molani, which is a native term hard to explain but on the whole it indicates that you want to live, not die.28
Grun-tu-molani/l'chaim: it's all the same in the end. Eventually, this unfettered display of feeling required Bellow to open up the form as well as the tone of contemporary fiction. Speaking of Herzog, Bellow declared: "A writer should be free to express himself easily, naturally, copiously, in a form which frees his mind, his energies. What should he hobble himself with formalities? With the desire to be 'correct'?" In fiction, too, as with poetry, the new American literature now represented "a democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form." And in Saul Bellow's case, as with Hart Crane and E. E. Cummings, the sentiment that most needed expression, in the end, was the feeling of spontaneous happiness. Like those two poets, Bellow expressly repudiated T. S. Eliot's Waste Land mentality:

The tone of elegy from the 1920's to the 50's, the atmosphere of Eliot in The Waste Land [...] is the essence of much modern realism [...] I think a good deal of Herzog can be explained simply by the implicit assumption that existence, quite apart from any of our judgments, has value, that existence is worthful.30

L'Chaim, we might say.

VIII.

Apart from releasing the innermost wellsprings of feeling, the loosening power of the new sentimentality provided one other important benefit. It appears evident in retrospect that the pervasive theme of alienation in modern American literature related significantly to the WASP ethic of emotional reticence. Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Carson McCullers (in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter) may have succeeded in portraying the ideal of having dignity, but to have class, in this sense of suppressing emotional responses, carried a dreadful risk of loneliness. Indeed, the invention of the interior monologue form, as in Eliot's "Prufrock" and Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, for example, appears to have been made to serve the WASP theme of lack of communication, as though to bear out the contention of that great WASP psychologist, William James, who declared (in the "Stream of Consciousness" chapter
of his *Principles of Psychology*) that "the breach from one mind to another is perhaps the greatest breach in nature."³¹

Sentimentality, for all its risks of emotional excess and falsifying reality, provided an essential way of closing that breach. To know the experience of *soul*-music, as in Toni Morrison's examples, is to have communion with others sharing the response to that music. Or to follow the *l'chaim* principle, with Saul Bellow, is to open up possibilities of improved discourse on both the emotional and intellectual level. As Bellow said in a book review of André Gide in 1951, "sadly enough, the number of intelligent people whose most vital conversation is with themselves is growing [...]." But "dialogue," he goes on to say, "not monologue, is the foundation of a civilized life."³² Thinking back to the WASP isolatos of modern American literature--Eliot's *Prufrock*, Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Faulkner's *Darl Bundren*--we may conclude that the WASP code of dignity through emotional repression required too high a price. It is perhaps a fortunate thing for American literature that the country's social pluralism assures continual flux and change in its literary fashions. Thanks to America's ethnic subcultures, traditional, formal, and emotional constraints are always subject to sentimental leavening, and American readers can always look forward to their next "democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form."

Notes

3 *The Hemingway Reader* 95.
13 The Portable Mark Twain 323.
19 Quoted in Horton 122.
21 Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem 30.
23 LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), The System of Dante's Hell (New York: Grove Press, 1965) 15. The statement reads: "This thing, if you read it, will jam your face in my shit. Now say something intelligent!"
25 Morrison 125.
26 Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King (New York: Compass, 1965) 33.
27 Bellow 274.
28 Bellow 283.
30 Writers at Work 188.
31 Quoted in Ellmann/Feidelson 716.