

The Recluse. A Fragment.

The Recluse engages with many of the fashionable literary forms of its era, notably the cult of sensibility, which endorsed an excessive responsiveness to tales of suffering. Yet there are also elements of what may be called pre-romantic style in the descriptions of its natural setting: 'I reached one of the most sequestered places, the imagination of a Poet ever described:- Not a human creature had I seen since I entered the wood.'¹ Henry Feron Heath immediately elevates his text by its comparison to the concerns of poetry. However, his use of dashes breaks up the narrative. He seems to have just begun a lofty description when his tone switches and becomes matter-of-fact. This gives his account a disconcerting, jolting rhythm, and thus we can see his nod to the gothic genre. At points the story is unsettling and gloomy, and, particularly in the first few pages based in the wood, full of suspense. Yet *The Recluse* does not merely engage with current discourses in literature, it is clearly very modern and unconventional in its setting. Published two years before the beginning of the French Revolution, the storm clouds were gathering. Nevertheless Heath has chosen to set his fragment at Versailles, a court which was under a great deal of scrutiny and criticism. Still what is most surprising is that he partakes of the criticism which would soon become outlawed in England, with the 'wartime suppression of radical ideas.'² Nonetheless Heath portrays the French court as dissolute and degenerate, which leads him into a critique of Sentimentalism. Heath sees Sensibility as a vain and self-indulgent form, and undermines it throughout his text,

¹ Henry Feron Heath, *The Recluse. A Fragment*. (South-Shields: James Churnside, 1787), p. 2. Subsequent references are to this edition, page numbers are given in parentheses.

² Markman Ellis, 'The Dangerous Tendency of Novels' and the Controversy of Sentimentalism', in *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge

whilst seeming to conform to its conventions.

The narrative of *The Recluse* begins abruptly: ‘- I continued travelling through the labyrinth’. (2) This unsettling opening, compounded by the hyphen that allows the narrator to begin the story without preamble, makes the reader feel as lost as the narrator. While it is unusual to begin a novel without a description of the protagonist, it serves to heighten, and give a sense of authenticity to the fiction, that this could be a fragment of a found manuscript. As the narrator, who remains unnamed throughout, wanders through the wood he comes across a prostrate figure, weeping over a grave. The narrator is surprised by the youth and upper-class manners of the recluse, who, seeing his surprise, ventures to tell his story. Born of a wealthy family, Ferdinand has grown up with impeccable morals, and values his family’s honour. After distinguishing himself in the army, Ferdinand becomes heir to the fortune of a Duke. This takes him to the court at Versailles, where he speedily becomes prey to the fashionable, but dissipated mode of life, and develops a gambling addiction. After assisting an old man who is being attacked, Ferdinand becomes intimately acquainted with his family, and falls in love with his daughter Elvira. Unexpectedly her father refuses his consent for them to marry, as she is already promised to an unknown other. Ferdinand is unable to bear being apart from Elvira and convinces her to elope, yet on the night of their escape he is assaulted in her garden and kills his assailant. This turns out to be his father, who was assisting in the capture of the “rake,” and Ferdinand is thrown in jail. Meanwhile, the false friend who was to help him elope, has abducted Elvira. It is at this point that a dear friend whom he met while in the army returns and explains that Elvira is his sister but that his family were

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forced to live under an assumed name, and it is in fact Ferdinand she was promised to. He is found innocent of murder and tracks down Elvira who is being held prisoner. However, he is too late and arrives as she is dying, having stabbed herself rather than lose her honour by submitting to her captor. The Recluse's story at an end, the hearer thanks him and continues on his way.

When looking at *The Recluse* in its original, and perhaps only edition,³ what is immediately striking is how much this tiny book has been valued by its previous owners. Apart from the pages being made slightly dirty through time and use, it is immaculate in its beautifully mottled brown leather cover, with the gold fillets on the spine, and the gilt edges of the pages still wholly in tact. Indeed, the ornamentation of the book does not end on the outside. The inside of the cover has a marbled effect in rich, bright colours. It is clear that *The Recluse* was a highly valued book, as not only would its owner have spent a great deal of money on it, but it was obviously considered suitable for display to warrant all these embellishments. This seems unusual, however, as: 'From the first, novel-reading was perceived to be a less elite, less intellectually challenging form of entertainment, which carried with it moral dangers and was capable of leading young readers off the beaten track.'⁴ It was generally accepted that novels could hugely influence their readers, and thus the future of the country. Therefore one may wonder why *The Recluse* was preserved as an example of merit. The fragment is somewhat moralistic, yet there is no strong didactic plot, or any characters the reader would want to closely emulate. Nevertheless, a clue to this may be found on the book plate. On the

³ As seen at the Chawton House Library, Chawton, Hertfordshire [21 November 2008]

⁴ Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan, 'Introduction: Modelling the Novel', in *Making the Novel: Fiction*

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inside cover of the text is a highly ornate miniature of a deer in a wood, which could be meant to reflect the setting of the novel; yet is also suggestive of the creativity of its owner. The owner is shown to be original by choosing an attractive picture rather than his family shield, or another common device; for example, a crown. The name underneath this book plate is “Gilbert Wakefield B. A.” Wakefield was a respected and eminent scholar, as well as a political activist. He believed in the French Revolution and was noted for his controversial religious views.⁵ That Wakefield valued *The Recluse* is evidence of its technical virtuosity, yet may also effect our reading of the novel. It suggests that this book holds more than may be originally perceived, as I will analyse later in this essay.

The Recluse is a provocative title, and the full stops used in the heading give it a heightened sense of drama. However, the mystery suggested by the book’s title is echoed by its history. That it was published in South-Shields in County Durham is the first hint of its mysterious origins, far away from the publishing hub of London. ‘Books had been sold in provincial towns - in shops and at markets and fairs - from the beginning of the trade in printed books and indeed before that, but it was only from the early eighteenth century onwards that a more organised and economically significant provincial trade began to develop. [... Conversely,] The short-term significance of this change lay not in the small number of books printed outside London in the eighteenth century, but in the rapid growth of provincial newspapers’.⁶ As John Feather explains, it was still unusual

and Society in Britain (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 13

⁵ Bruce E. Graver, “Gilbert Wakefield”, from *Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28418>> [accessed 2 December 2008]

⁶ John Feather, “Part 1: The Early Modern Book Trade”, in *A History of British Publishing*

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for a book to be printed outside London, even though trade was growing. This can be further emphasised by the text's publisher James Churnside, as *The Recluse* is the only novel to be credited to him, and he died in the year of its publication, 1787.⁷

Furthermore, although the text has been later attributed to Henry Feron Heath, the novel was published anonymously, and there is no biographical information on either Heath or Churnside. One may speculate as to whether the withdrawal of the author was a conscious decision in order to add further intrigue to his text; the mysterious birth of the novel may heighten the fiction of a found manuscript. Still, if this is the case, then the information on the title page appears to contradict itself. Heath has given his novel the heading of *A Fragment*, which is suggestive of an incomplete narrative of uncertain origins, yet further down the page the fictitious nature of the tale is emphasised: 'Printed by James Churnside, for the author.' (ii) By emphasising his author status, Heath steps away from the pretence favoured by Richardson (and many of his contemporaries), who asserted that his novels were non-fiction histories, and that he was merely the editor who compiled them. Perhaps this hints that it was becoming more acceptable to write fiction. 'During the middle decades of the eighteenth century the author gradually came to be recognised as a more important player in the commercial world of the book. This was partly a matter of supply and demand;'⁸ The consumerist approach to literature was growing, and more people were becoming able to make a successful career out of writing, which can be evidenced by the multitude of titles published in the same year, for example: *The Sorrows of the Heart: A Novel*, by John Heriat; *The School of Virtue: A*

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 62

⁷ Search result for "James Churnside", ###The British Book Trade Index###
<<http://www.bbti.bham.ac.uk/Details.htm?TraderID=13765>> (paragraph 1 of 1) [accessed on 23 January 2008]

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Novel, on a new plan, inscribed to Her Majesty, by a gentleman of the temple; *Augusta: or, The Female Travellers. A Novel*, by Dr Andrews.⁹ Moreover, this also shows that more people were more willing to give their name. Heath's choice of anonymity is therefore less likely to be a product of prudent censorship, as perhaps it would have been earlier in the century.

The title page of this fragment could be deemed unusual in another light as well, as the paratext seems unusually sparse compared to other works of the era, particularly texts of the early eighteenth-century: 'titles to early novels, as in eighteenth century books of all sorts, did not just name; they summarized or explained. Many of the early title pages are, in fact, uncomfortably crowded.'¹⁰ In contrast, *The Recluse* is very empty; yet this could be due to the established nature of the sentimental mode, by labelling it *A Fragment*. Heath aligns his text with the episodic narratives popular in Sentimental literature, and so has no need to add a preparatory gloss as the reader would already know what to expect. However, while the title page reveals little, the dedication is very telling about the values and intention of the author. It is perhaps strange that after choosing anonymity Heath has dedicated his work to a man with whom he had a very personal connection, and has even stated where he may be found: in 'Witton-le-Wear.' (iii) The reason for this can be inferred from the dedication, as Heath follows the convention of the humble author so much as to suggest that his achievement is wholly down to the dedicatee, the Reverend

⁸ Feather, *Part 1: The Early Modern Book Trade*, p. 56

⁹ Search results for "1787", *COPAC*
<http://copac.ac.uk/wzgw?form=qs&id=081223d18745a7afe671b1a478f2b47a556ef8&au=&ti=&any=1787&fs=Search> > [accessed 27 December 2008]

¹⁰ Janine Barchas, *The Title Page: Advertisement, Identity and Deceit*, in *Graphic Design, Print Culture and the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 65

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Mr Farrer: 'I dedicate this little piece to You, as the first fruits of those instructions you have bestowed upon me,' (v) The reader can understand the nature of their relationship through this sentence, and Heath goes on to name him as 'the Man to whom I owe my education.' (vi) The emphasis Heath places on learning reveals the value he attaches to it, which may suggest that he was poor, and would not have received an education had it not been for this man's charity. This supposition is given more weight when Heath displays a concern to use several biblical references, as if to give proof of this education: 'As the Jews offered up the first fruits of their produce to Him by whose means they enjoyed them,' (v) Conversely, it is unusual that, having chosen a Reverend as his dedicatee, his subject is centered on learning, and friendship rather than didacticism: 'During the previous three centuries of the print era, the authorities of the state and church had attempted to influence the textual content of the printed material available [...] reading was seen mainly as a means of advancing religion, morality, and knowledge.'¹¹ Nevertheless, Heath's text is hardly moralistic. Yet his restraint from sermonising certainly sets the tone which will remain throughout the fragment: sincerity, yet with some cynicism: 'Men possessed of birth, of honours, or of riches are generally the patrons chosen upon this occasion; and the venal author pours out his soothing flattery, in hopes of advancing his pecuniary interest.' (iii-iv)

Novels are as much a product of their time as all other consumer items, indeed ,consumer demand was now the ultimate key to the Industrial Revolution,,¹² which began as the

¹¹ William St Clair, 'Reading and its Consequences., in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 11

¹² Colin Campbell, 'Accounting for the Consumer Revolution in Eighteenth Century England., in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 17

standard of living began to rise in the eighteenth century. Likewise the novel of sensibility was formed by its era. Janet Todd notes that: ‘In the early years [of the eighteenth century], philosophy both responded to and created a popular demand for a new set of ideas with which to account for human nature’.¹³ This seems to suggest that Sentimentalism was a reaction against this age of logic (and its representative: Pope), which predicted the Romantic poets. Consumerism was growing in this era, so it is only natural that people should have critiqued it before the Romantics responded to it. Sensibility is, in essence, a commitment to demonstrative and uninhibited emotion in answer to pitiful suffering and natural beauty. Sentimentalism was such a phenomenon of its time that it is held accountable for the change in the definition of the word “sentimental.” ‘At the end of the eighteenth century the use of “sentimental” turned from the approbatory to the pejorative; from “exhibiting refined and elevated feelings” to “addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion.”’¹⁴ This alteration in meaning hints at the type of criticism sensibility was to receive, however, during its vogue, it was considered to count as a virtue.¹⁵ *The Recluse* engages with the discourse of sensibility: ‘most of my time was spent with her - happy moments! - how fleeting was your stay!’ (59-60) This statement is a clear device of Sentimentalism, as the feeling protagonist is able to draw a quasi-philosophical reflection directly from a mundane recital of everyday life. Furthermore, his distress is made evident through the use of hyphens and exclamation marks, it suggests that his emotion is making him falter over his words. In addition, Ferdinand often breaks into dramatic exclamations: ‘Oh Elvira! Said he, thou dear

¹³ Janet Todd, ‘Introduction’, in *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 3

¹⁴ John Mullan, ‘Sentimental Novels’, in *The Cambridge Companion to The Eighteenth Century Novel*, ed. By John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 236

¹⁵ Mullan, ‘Sentimental Novels’, p. 248

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departed shade,' (5) While these random expressions of grief are offered as evidence of his tortured soul, they also engage with the sort of romanticised, elevated language, which is often part of sentimental discourse. The use of exclamation and alliteration reinforce his feelings, and the alliterated "d" gives a harsh sound that could suggest a choking back of tears. Devices like this help to elicit the readers' sympathy by heightening pathos, and making the grief we witness seem more important through its poetical leanings.

A seminal text of the cult of sensibility is Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, published in 1771. *The Recluse* seems to draw a lot of inspiration from Mackenzie's work, in its characterisation of a sensitive male protagonist, and in its episodic narrative. Although these devices are common in Sentimental literature, Heath's text could be seen to link closely with Mackenzie's, as it steps away from the lustfulness often associated with Sentimentalism: 'sensibility and the erotic are strangely linked especially in women as qualities of sensibility (virtue, chastity, sensitivity, modesty) are seen as attractive.'¹⁶ Elvira is presented as the model woman by upholding these values. Indeed it is the licentious women of Versailles who have no sensibility that are portrayed, in contrast to Elvira, as the targets of wanton male desire. Moreover, the text has none of the innuendo which is to be found in other novels of sensibility. For example, in the work of Laurence Sterne. Conversely, while Heath seems to engage with Mackenzie's novel, he is in fact subtly undermining his approach - particularly in the portrayal of a sensitive, feminized male. Ferdinand is at first a youthful and vigorous man, yet his increasing commitment to sensibility is not imaged as a virtue but renders him pathetic: 'My guide welcomed me

to this mansion of sorrow;’ (13) The metaphor used here shows how Ferdinand is wallowing in his excessive demonstrations of grief. However, the more he does so, the more he is feminized. Ferdinand becomes desexualized, and in conjunction becomes a less and less effective character: he fails to rescue Elvira, and retires simply to indulge his emotions. Additionally, homoerotic hints surround his increasing sentiment: ‘He started back, looked earnestly at me for a moment, and then clasped me to his bosom; I found the tears trickle down his cheeks –’ (92) At a time when homosexuality was still strictly outlawed, these scenes of tenderness between men advance an additional challenge to sensibility, where such homoeroticism is acceptable, as it forms a stark contrast to Ferdinand’s chivalric masculinity of the beginning.

A large difference, of course, between *The Recluse* and *The Man of Feeling*, is that Mackenzie’s Harley is subjected to various emotional tests in his encounter with a cross-section of society, whereas *The Recluse* contains only one such example. However, that Heath has clearly drawn on Mackenzie’s work reveals an interesting segment of the text’s history. When copyright law was introduced in 1710, London’s monopoly on publishing was reduced a little, and many booksellers in the north of England began to do trade with both London and Scotland.¹⁷ As Mackenzie was Scottish, and published in Scotland, this could indicate that Heath, who came from County Durham, had access to *The Man of Feeling* long before some of his contemporaries. Heath explicitly associates his text with Mackenzie’s through its fragmentary structure: ‘The device allows [authors] to leave out

¹⁶ Ellis, ‘The Dangerous Tendency of Novels’ and the Controversy of Sentimentalism’, p. 213

¹⁷ Feather, ‘Part 1: The Early Modern Book Trade’, p. 62-3

dull connecting narratives and to offer in their place a series of tales of distress.’¹⁸ In this manner *The Man of Feeling* functions almost as a series of tableaux designed solely to provoke pity in the reader, which is evidenced clearly by the inclusion of an index in a nineteenth-century edition detailing where a reader should shed tears: ‘*Choking, &c, not counted.*’¹⁹ Similarly, Ferdinand’s melancholy tale could initiate a response from the reader. However, as the nameless narrator presents only a brief reply on his part, it may be said that this fragment is more a test of the reader’s sensibility, as we have no Harley to mediate and instruct our proper response: ‘responsiveness to sensibility was considered to indicate the truly perceptive mind.’²⁰ The reader is able to become the nameless narrator, with their response as the only one of consequence. Fragments grew to be a very fashionable: ‘The episode becomes the height of narrative achievement, its immediate effect registered on the reader’s interior structures.’²¹ This immediacy was meant to demonstrate the ‘very momentariness of feelings’,²² yet it was also a pioneering narrative structure, which potentially undermined the attention to detail and accuracy endorsed by realism, as it allowed the author to write without concern for continuity and gave emotion overriding authority. This can be seen immediately in *The Man of Feeling*, which begins at chapter eleven, likewise *The Recluse* begins abruptly, and without explanation.

¹⁸ Stephen Bending and Stephen Bygrave, ‘Introduction’, in *The Man of Feeling* by Henry Mackenzie, ed. By Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. viii

¹⁹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. By Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 110

²⁰ Kenneth C. Slagle, ‘Introduction’, in *The Man of Feeling*, by Henry Mackenzie (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958), p. x

²¹ Ann Jessie Van Sant, ‘Reading to the Moment: A Note on Sensibility and Narrative Form’, in *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 117

²² Mullan, ‘Sentimental Novels’, p. 241

Despite all the similarities between Heath's text and those of his contemporaries, *The Recluse* was published so much later than many of the famous texts of sensibility, that one must question whether he intends to maintain the same approach as his predecessors. 'By the 1790s almost all serious novelists noted the selfishness, irrationality and amorality of the cult of sensibility.'²³ It seems sensible to assume that Gilbert Wakefield (mentioned above) would have engaged with the debate over the merits of sensibility, and found it wanting. Thus I am encouraged to read *The Recluse* in a new context, one which subtly undermines Sentimental conventions. One instance which can immediately be seen to destabilize Sentimentalism is that Ferdinand is not the underdog which the genre requires: 'The distressed are natural victims, whose misery is demanded by their predicament as defenceless women, aged men, helpless infants or melancholic youths.'²⁴ Ferdinand is none of the above, and indeed his sorrows are shown to be a product of his own ineptitude: from his refusal to stop gambling, to his failure to act honourably; by convincing Elvira to elope with him. Yet, what is ironic, is that Ferdinand has reached this self-destruction only through his engagement with the fashionable concern for sensibility. At the outset of his account, his values are chivalric: 'I loved my King; I loved my Country; and I regarded my own honour as highly as I did these.' (18) Conversely, when he is installed at Versailles he has no occupation and so is prey to 'the vices of the age:' (36) and so begins to engage with Sentimental discourse. Ferdinand's sorrow makes him believe he is not fit for society, and so he retreats to indulge his emotion. However, this is shown to be completely self-indulgent, and even affected when we learn, right at the end of the story, that the grave he weeps over is a fake: 'her

²³ Ellis, 'The Dangerous Tendency of Novels' and the Controversy of Sentimentalism', p. 190

²⁴ Todd, 'Introduction', p. 3

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real body is not here, that was sent to the family vault, but my imagination can easily supply its place.’ (158) At this revelation the entire narrative crumbles, and even the setting of a dark wood (at first gloomy and atmospheric, and seeming to predict the Romantic’s concern with the sublime and nature) now seems contrived.

Although nameless, and silent throughout almost the entire text, the narrator allows insights into Heath’s intentions. Indeed, his silence at the end of Ferdinand’s narrative is particularly telling.

Here the stranger left off speaking, and I returned him my acknowledgements for the pleasure he had given, and the confidence he had reposed in me: He then directed me to the right road, and I turned down the path that lead to -, full of the thoughts of what I had heard and seen ----- (158-9)

The Man of Feeling taught its readers to expect a torrent of tears and embraces from its narrator upon the recital of a sorrowful tale, and, moreover, some assistance for the afflicted. Yet in this instance the narrator is remarkably cold. If we are to judge this narrator in the same manner as readers judge Harley, it is by his sensibility and responsiveness - in other words he must demonstrate rather than just “think.” The narrator’s passivity is very striking. The contrast his silence makes shows the affectation of display, and so the emptiness and immorality of Sentimentalism. Furthermore, a continuing concern for readers was the pleasure which they, and the protagonists took in other people’s suffering: ‘Suffering becomes just another commodity, something to be

consumed in a commercial transaction.’²⁵ Unlike Harley, who, by giving monetary aid to those he pities, appears to be ‘paying for emotional display.’²⁶ (which suggests an underhand experience,) the narrator admits openly the “pleasure” he has taken in Ferdinand’s story. Still, he declines to give any further emotion, and the story breaks off as abruptly as it began. This emphasises Heath’s refusal to endorse contrived and excessive narratives as examples of truth. Like prostitution, Sentimentalism exploits people’s suffering for the pleasure of those who can afford it, and it is usually a performance to provoke a certain response.

The Recluse is a transitional text, rejecting Sentimentalism, yet without realising the next movement in literature - Romanticism. Although it hints at a pre-romantic style, and contains elements of Gothicism, Heath’s text does not fall comfortably into any category. This resistance to being labelled echoes the withdrawal of Heath himself from the public eye. One may question whether this inability to categorise the text alongside the lack of information available about its author lead to the book being neglected; generally there is more information about canonical texts. Furthermore, the novel cannot be placed within a significant period in history which reiterates the transitional nature of the style. The essence of the text is anticipation. Heath’s critique of sensibility was not unusual for his time, yet there is a degree of subtlety in its criticism which is evidence of a virtuosio writer. He seems to allow the reader to see the flaws of sensibility without obtrusive direction. It is strange that such a talent should have only this novel attributed to him, yet Heath’s own reclusiveness could indicate that if he did publish others they were anonymous, as of course *The Recluse* was on publication.

²⁵ Bending and Bygrave, ‘Introduction’, p. xx-xxi

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²⁶ Bending and Bygrave, 'Introduction', p. xx

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