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The Ethics of Reading the Archives of Enslavement: Experiments in Interpretation

“Teaching literature is teaching how to read. How to notice things in a text that a speed-reading culture is trained to disregard, overcome, edit out, or explain away; how to read what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking; how to take in evidence from a page, not seek a reality to substitute for it.” (Johnson 1986: 140)

For the generation of literary scholars who studied in the 1990s and 2000s, the poststructuralist debunking of the autonomous coherent subject and stable meanings was often the starting point in our training as readers. For me, the question of the experiment is thus closely linked to the tension between the experiment as an empirical testing of novel hypotheses and experimental practices of interpretation that highlight the process over the product. As readers we bring different perspectives to texts that influence how we generate meaning from linguistic representations, representations that are themselves frequently implicated in historically fraught archives. I believe that the urge to bring the seemingly opposed trajectories of “evidence-based close reading” versus “experimental” practices of interpretation into conversation is related to the larger political turmoil of recent years and the right-wing appropriation of traditionally ‘left’ challenges to clear-cut meaning. The insights of poststructuralism are reduced to the derogatory label ‘anything goes’, blaming ‘gender ideology’ and ‘multiculturalists’ for the demise of the West (and good academic practice in the humanities). In this inflammatory logic, complaints about ‘fake news’ and a general repudiation of scientific fact are presented as equally legitimate claims to ‘one’s own truth’ based on political leanings, as which the minoritarian deconstruction of unchallenged white male supremacy is distorted.

These political disputes have thus also reinvigorated an interest in methods of reading, challenging the long predominant “cultural studies”-informed modes of literary interpretation and demanding a return to the supposedly more fact-based “modest” methodologies of philological research and “close reading” that the opening quote of Johnson lays out, a trend that Jeffrey J. Williams summarises in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* review “[The New Modesty in Literary Criticism](#).” And I am not denying that if we understand interpretation as a mere dissecting of the actual words on the page, then there are indeed forms of reading that are

closer to the text than others that might appear more far-fetched. However, with reference to one brief example from my forthcoming book, *Familial Feeling: Entangled Tonalities in Early Black Atlantic Writing and the Rise of the British Novel*, I want to offer a glimpse into the ethical challenges of reading the archival records of enslavement that cannot simply be resolved via the return to “method”.

As an approach in literary interpretation, “surface reading” (Best and Marcus 2009; Love 2010) replaces the humanities’ interest in ideology critique with attempts to focus on “just reading” by prioritising the materiality of the text without contesting the political urgency of the traumatic past, which we could also understand in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terms as an “accountability to the real” (1997: 2). This “empirical” approach could be contrasted with more creative counter strategies of reading and writing that Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation”. Hartman is committed to a practice of reading *as* rewriting, which she frames as an ethical response to the dead: She shows how interpretation is always linked to a retelling of the stories of the enslaved and ponders, “how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?” (2008: 3)

While one approach highlights the reader’s ethical response as attending to what is actually stated on the page, the other emphasises the responsibility to address what is left out. In light of these contradictions, is there a way to frame our temporal and/or affective proximity to the text to produce literary interpretation that is accountable to the actual words on the page and their historical context of enunciation? Stephen Best radically stipulates, “Why must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on an assumed continuity between that past and our present and on the implicit consequence that to study that past is somehow to intervene in it?” (Best 2012: 454) and he continues, “we might thus have to resist the impulse to redeem the past and instead rest content with the fact that our orientation toward it remains forever perverse, queer, askew” (Best 2012: 456). And while I am not sure such a disengaged form is methodologically even possible (and always politically well-advised), I do believe there is some merit in experimenting with a queering of the assumed linearity between literary text and immediate affect. These questions of proximity are especially problematic when dealing with conventionalised textual representations of feelings, as in the eighteenth-century fascination with slavery as a topic of sentimental fiction in Britain.

To this day, reading novels is tied to the pleasurable activity of immersing oneself in stories, to digress from the ordinary. However, when this digression includes the depiction of the pain of others, this can also morph into the more problematic paternalistic feeling *for* others. In

literary sentimentalism the depiction of enslavement is commonly reduced to scenes of spectacular Black suffering and tearful white pity (Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* has been foundational for the critique of these conventions). The problematic implications of such an elusive representation of enslavement can be illustrated with reference to a short and much-discussed scene in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (2005 [1768]) in which a missing passport in France triggers a highly self-indulgent comparison of narrator Yorick's misery to slavery. In Paris, he sees an incarcerated bird: "a starling hung in a little cage. 'I can't get out,—I can't get out,' said the starling" (Sterne 2005: 69). Later Yorick reflects on his own constricted liberty of movement. In his room, he closes his eyes to almost luxuriously wallow in his misery:

I sat down close to my table, and leaning my head upon my hand, I began to figure to myself the miseries of confinement. I was in a right frame for it, and so I gave full scope to my imagination.

I was going to begin with the millions of my fellow-creatures born to no inheritance but slavery: but finding, however affecting the picture was, that I could not bring it near me, and that the multitude of sad groups in it did but distract me.— (Sterne 2005: 70)

However affecting slavery is, the imagination of the suffering multitude distracts Yorick.¹ It is only when he focuses on a fictional individual that the true power of sentimental empathy works, his "heart began to bleed" and later, with "a deep sigh," he "burst into tears" (Sterne 2005: 71).² Markman Ellis stresses the figurative connection between the bird and the slave (cf. 1996: 74) in relation to the scene. In contrast, Ramesh Mallipeddi fundamentally repudiates these metaphorical interpretations. He argues, "in these episodes, set in [...] absolutist France, the captives are not literally slaves but religious minorities, victims not of colonial slavery but of Catholic persecution; in other words, the specific contexts alluded to in these episodes obscure rather than illuminate the sociopolitical structures of slavery" (2016: 87). Despite these conflicting interpretations that highlight either the metaphorical representation of slavery or its potential concealment, most critics, including Ellis and Mallipeddi, seem to agree on the limits of sentimentalism as a politically effective discourse that would genuinely challenge the British

¹ Robert Markley reads the inability to sympathise with more than one individual specifically in terms of class privilege that fears social instability and contests hereditary nobility (cf. 1987: 226).

² Marcus Wood speaks of the "solipsistic base of Sentimentalism" (2002: 14) and the "auto-erotics of empathy" (2002: 16). Thus, the setting of a solitary shedding of bodily fluids could, of course, also more satirically and sexually ambiguously be associated with masturbation in this scene.

status quo of the time. What this brief scene and the short glimpse into debates on methods of reading demonstrate is the very problem of interpretation to which we won't find an empirical solution. The word "slavery" on the page can and has been contextualised very differently here. In such sentimental scenes, especially in Sterne's often self-reflexive texts, it is not entirely clear what the desired effect on the readers is: are we to empathise with the victims of injustice (the starling or the metaphorical slave?) or are we to indulge in the tearful display of affectionate feeling of Yorick? Or, are the readers invited to take on a much more critical distance to these thus potentially self-reflexive and mocking spectacles of literary sentimentalism, which are embedded in more humorous and satirical contexts in Sterne's fiction after all? How much reflexivity regarding the literary conventions of sentimentalism, especially when addressing such a controversially debated topic as slavery predating abolition, can be assumed of his contemporaries?

If we want to begin to answer these questions, it is not helpful to pit the interest in a more "empirical" close reading and the more "political" contextual against each other. As readers we should weigh the potentially different and contradictory understandings of enslavement that this text and its various contexts offer us. The same words on the page can be both interpreted as indulgently sentimental and still at times yield politically mobilising effects. Sterne's writing became a key reference point for contemporary Black British eighteenth-century "man of feeling" Ignatius Sancho who, in his letters to Sterne, in fact, seems to have pushed the author to adopt a more literal understanding of slavery, one that would imply the active support of abolition. Interpretation should not be tied down by our current affective political investment. But in order to provide readings that follow an ethics of close textual analysis, we also need to accept the complex entanglements of meanings with their various socio-political historical as well as generic aesthetic contexts and this also involves accepting the radical ambivalence of words.

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