

# RAYMOND WILLIAMS

## Sensibility†

Sensibility became a very important word in English between mC18 and mC20, but in recent years this importance has quite sharply declined. It is a very difficult word, both in its senses and variations within this historical period, and in its relations within the very complicated group of words centred on *sense*. We have only to remember that **sensibility** is not a general noun for the condition of being *sensible* to realize how difficult this group can be. Some of the interrelations of the group have been analysed by William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Words*, 250–310; 1951.

The earliest uses of **sensibility**, fw *sensibilitas*, L, followed the earliest uses of **sensible**, fw *sensibile*, F, *sensibilis*, IL—felt, perceived, through the (physical) *senses*. This use of **sensible**, from C14, underlay **sensibility** as physical feeling or sense perception from C15. But it was not a word often used. The significant development in *sense* was the extension from a process to a particular kind of product: *sense* as good sense, good judgment, from which

6. The publishing house of Longman wrote to Robert Cruttwell, who owned the copyright of *Cruttwell's Gazetteer*, that 'We consider it justice to the proprietor of the Copyright to inform you that we have but 54 copies remaining, & that if a new edition be not immediately proceeded with the property will suffer most materially' (Longman Letter Books, 1/98/123; 27 Jan. 1814).

7. See JA's note of 'Profits of my Novels', reproduced in facsimile in *Plan of a Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).

† From Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), pp. 280–83. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press and HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

the predominant modern meaning of **sensible** was to be derived. (*Common sense* has followed this track, ending in a blunt assertion of the obvious—what everybody knows, or knows to be practical—after its earlier and more active reference to a *sense* achieved by common process; the variations of COMMON. \* \* \* But before **sensible** was specialized to this limited use, it had moved, temporarily, in another direction, towards 'tender' or 'fine' feeling, from C16. This just survives in **sensible of** (cf. the special use of *touched*); *sense of* has a wider actual range, including neutrality. It was from **sensible** in this particular use that the important C18 use of **sensibility** was derived. It was more than *sensitivity*, which can describe a physical or an emotional condition. It was, essentially, a social generalization of certain personal qualities, or, to put it another way, a personal appropriation of certain social qualities. It thus belongs in an important formation which includes TASTE, *cultivation* and *discrimination*, and, at a different level, CRITICISM, and CULTURE in one of its uses, derived from *cultivated* and *cultivation*. All describe very general human processes, but in such a way as to specialize them; the negative effects of the actual exclusions that are so often implied can best be picked up in *discrimination*, which has survived both as the process of fine or informed judgment and as the process of treating certain groups unfairly. *Taste* and *cultivation* make little sense unless we are able to contrast their presence with their absence, in ways that depend on generalization and indeed on CONSENSUS. **Sensibility** in its C18 uses ranged from a use much like that of modern *awareness* (not only *consciousness* but *conscience*) to a strong form of what the word appears literally to mean, the ability to feel: 'dear Sensibility! source . . . unexhausted of all that's precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows' (Sterne, 1768).

It was at this point that its relation to *sentimental* became important. Sentiment, from fw *sentimentum*, mL, rw *sentire*, L—to feel, had ranged from C14 uses for physical feeling, and feeling of one's own, to C17 uses for both opinion and emotion. In mC18 *sentimental* was widely used: '*sentimental*, so much in vogue among the polite . . . Everything clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word . . . a *sentimental* man . . . a *sentimental* party . . . a *sentimental* walk' (Lady Bradshaugh, 1749). The association with **sensibility** was then close: a conscious openness to feelings, and also a conscious consumption of feelings. The latter use made *sentimental* vulnerable, and in C19 this was, often crudely, pushed home: 'that rosepink vapour of Sentimentalism, Philanthropy and Feasts of Morals' (Carlyle, 1837); 'Sentimental Radicalism' (Bagehot on Dickens, 1858). Much that was moral or radical, in intention and in effect, was washed with the same brush that was used to

depict self-conscious or self-indulgent displays of *sentiment*. Southey, in his conservative phase, brought the words together: 'the sentimental classes, persons of ardent or morbid sensibility' (1823). This complaint is against people who feel 'too much' as well as against those who 'indulge their emotions'. This confusion has permanently damaged *sentimental* (though limited positive uses survive, typically in *sentimental value*) and wholly determined *sentimentality*.

**Sensibility** escaped this. It maintained its C18 range, and became important in one special area, in relation to AESTHETIC feeling. (Jane Austen, of course, in *Sense and Sensibility*, had explored the variable qualities which the specialized terms appeared to define. In *Emma* she may have picked up one tendency in 'more acute sensibility to fine sounds than to my feelings' (II, vi, 1815).) Ruskin wrote of 'sensibility to colour' (1843). The word seems to have been increasingly used to distinguish a particular area of interest and response which could be distinguished not only from RATIONALITY or *intellectuality* but also (by contrast with one of its C18 associations) from *morality*. By eC20 **sensibility** was a key word to describe the human area in which artists worked and to which they appealed. In the subsequent development of a CRITICISM (q.v.) based on distinctions between *reason* and *emotion*, **sensibility** was a preferred general word for an area of human response and judgment which could not be reduced to the *emotional* or *emotive*. What T. S. Eliot, in the 1920s, called the **dissociation of sensibility** was a supposed disjunction between 'thought' and 'feeling'. **Sensibility** became the apparently unifying word, and on the whole was transferred from kinds of response to a use equivalent to the formation of a particular mind: a whole activity, a whole way of perceiving and responding, not to be reduced to either 'thought' or 'feeling'. EXPERIENCE, in its available senses of something active and something formed, took on the same generality. For an important period, **sensibility** was that from which art proceeded and through which it was received. In the latter use, *taste* and *cultivation*, which had been important associates in the original formation, were generally replaced by *discrimination* and *criticism*. But for all the interest of this phase, which was dominant to c. 1960, the key terms were still predominantly social generalizations of personal qualities or, as became increasingly apparent, personal appropriations of social qualities. **Sensibility** as an apparently neutral term in discussion of the sources of art, without the difficult overtones of *mind* or the specializations of *thought* and *feeling*, proved more durable than as a term of appeal or ratification for any particular response. But, as in the C18 emergence, the abstraction and generalization of an active personal quality, as if it were an evident social fact or

process, depended on a consensus of particular valuations, and as these broke down or were rejected **sensibility** came to seem too deeply coloured by them to be available for general use. The word faded from active discussion, but it is significant that in its actual range (which is what is fundamentally at issue) no adequate replacement has been found.

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