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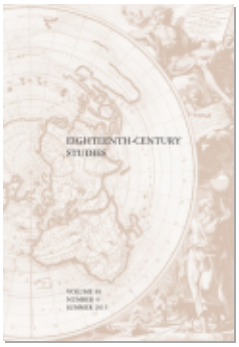

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# Suicide Notes and Popular Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century British Press

*Eric Parisot*

Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774, tr. 1779) marks a watershed moment in the literary and cultural history of eighteenth-century sensibility. While suicide is realized or threatens to rear its ugly head in a number of novels in the decades prior—Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747–48) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Eloise* (1761; tr. 1761), and Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* (1777) to name but a few—the lovelorn reflections and subsequent suicide of Goethe's eponymous gentleman presented eighteenth-century readers with a sensational and unprecedented dramatization of the duality of sensibility and illustrated how a capacity for refined emotion could also harbour incipient tendencies towards self-destruction. The novel, however, was not the only domain for sentimental suicide.

To borrow a phrase from Leslie Stephen, newspapers and magazines of the period also made a "luxury of grief"[1] by indulging their readers with an occasional sentimental or sensationalised report of suicide and also—most remarkably from a modern perspective—by publishing suicide notes. What is noticeable in this archive of published suicide notes is the degree to which many of these authors invoke contemporary conceptions of sensibility, both to frame their suicidal experience and to elicit desired (and often public) responses. The result is a collection of writing that constitutes an alternative textual history of sensibility. Printed suicide notes—as textual signifiers of fatal distress, written by subjects worthy of charitable sympathy—emerge as public markers of the incongruity of sensibility as

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both moral and pathological discourse. Furthermore, they often expose the slippery connections between the two.

## PUBLISHING SUICIDE NOTES

At first glance, one might expect a typical suicide note to be a rather constricted form of writing. Conventionally written in the form of a private letter addressed to a particular individual, it has an ostensibly limited audience. Written at a time when the resolve to die is at its height, composition is also often hastened. While the process of composition functions as an important psychological step by altering the suicide's focus from the life already lived to expectations of the future, it is ultimately a deferral of the physical act of dying; brevity, therefore, is usually preferred. And as Janet Todd identifies, if suicide notes appear disingenuous or trite, "it may be because huge emotions often express themselves in clichés. A suicide note cannot, through its generic needs, be emotions recollected in tranquillity; it has to be emotion enacted and expressed in the nearest words."[2] It is somewhat surprising, then, to instead encounter a stylistically-diverse body of samples that perform a variety of functions in accordance with a range of motivations. Contrary to expectations, the body of writing contained in the eighteenth-century press perhaps speaks more to the suicide note as a precarious and deeply conflicted performance, one that attempts to reconcile the surrender and reclamation of personal agency, the rejection and reformation of social ties, and ultimately, the competing desires for self-destruction and self-construction.[3]

Part of the explanation for this variety lies in the suicide note's more frequent publication in the eighteenth century. From mid-century, examples can be found in all major press formats—the morning daily, the evening tri-weekly, the weekly journal, and the monthly magazine. While most examples originate from London and surrounds, some of the notes and associated reports were sent by correspondents, not only from the provinces but also from continental Europe and America. Syndication, too, no doubt magnified the impression that the "detestable Practice of Suicide" had "become a Characteristic Vice" of the times and of the nation.[4] Suicide notes were increasingly viewed by printers as human interest stories, so what was once traditionally viewed as an intensely private epistolary transaction between loved ones soon became subject to public view. As a result, these notes collectively bear evidence of an increasing awareness of their new readership, transforming the genre from what was once a final and direct address to the closest of relations, or even God, to an opportunity for a parting public declaration, to claim an audience in death that the suicidal author could never command in life.

The existence of suicide notes as an eighteenth-century body of writing was brought to critical attention by MacDonald and Murphy's landmark study *Sleepless Souls* (1990), in which the authors claim that although suicide notes only featured in a small minority of coronial inquests and even fewer still were printed in papers and magazines, by the 1770s the published suicide note was "well established as a literary subgenre."[5] This article focuses on the period from 1750 to 1779—years marked by the rise of sensibility and sentimental discourse to the reaction against its suicidal tendencies, partly instigated by the English translation of Goethe's *Werther*. During this period, only twenty-two suicide notes seem to have been

printed in London newspapers and magazines; more than one would expect, but hardly as frequent as MacDonald and Murphy might seem to imply. Significantly, though, fifteen of these were printed in the 1770s, confirming the observation that printed suicide notes became more prevalent during this decade.The prevalence of published suicide notes in this period is discernibly aligned with the vogue for sentimentalism. Although these notes offer some insight into the varieties of suicidal experience in the eighteenth century, they equally offer a greater understanding of the affective reader and the most effective strategies used to rouse their emotions. More than merely gratifying the reader's morbid fascination, printed suicide notes appear to function as popular "sentimental vignettes,"[6] isolated scenes of suffering offered as opportunities for the reader to test their own capacity to feel and, should the chance arise, to provoke substantive moral response beyond the gift of a tear. As portraits of suicidal distress, they were more often than not presented to privilege the sentimental pleasures of sensibility over its fatal possibilities, or, in other terms, to arouse the warmth of compassion while concealing the residual cold and unfeeling corpse.

This underlying tendency towards sentimental fictive strategies raises the question of whether these suicide notes were genuine. Almost all of the suicide notes under consideration are purported to be real, some of which can be verified by coronial records. Some, however, are obviously fictional, providing the tragic *denouement* of an enclosing sentimental narrative. For instance, the fictional suicide note of the "generous and valiant" Chateaubriant is published in *Whitehall Evening Post* in 1761 within a tale that "will doubtless afford some Entertainment to our Readers."[7] Indeed, the editor acknowledges that the note itself, "which as it is accounted a fine Instance of true pathetic Simplicity, induced us to give the preceding Story." A similar example (ironically) attributed to Thomas Chatterton, entitled "*The unfortunate* Fathers," includes the despairing note of George Hinckley, a young lover unable to overcome the contrivances to keep him from his beloved.[8] More often than not, however, the question of veracity is a vexed one. Although presented as genuine examples, a number of the notes undoubtedly tend towards literary artifice, belying their alleged authenticity. Ultimately, attempts to draw clear distinctions between fact and fiction are of limited value here; focusing on questions of legitimacy only serves to understate the suicide note as an elaborate performance, framed and understood within a codified set of sentimental literary postures. As MacDonald and Murphy attest, the difficulty in establishing the genuine from the bogus "is of little consequence in studying the ways in which suicides represented their own deaths. . . . Men and women who were about to kill themselves borrowed the forms and languages for their own suicide note from the examples, genuine and fictional, that they read in the newspapers."[9] Here, MacDonald and Murphy appear to substantiate claims that tumultuous emotions are frequently expressed by way of common tropes and clichés borrowed from contemporary culture—in this case, a culture of affect and sentimental affectation.[10] Furthermore, these notes collectively replaced the traditional relationship between the suicidal author and its intended reader with multiple trajectories of affective exchange via a network or community of readers, enabled and mediated by the posthumously printed word.

## DEAR COURTEOUS READER

Concomitant with the proliferation of potential audiences was an increased variety of motives for writing suicide notes. Some wrote to seek forgiveness, others to justify their actions. Some used their final opportunity to reiterate their devotion, while others chose to air the marital grievances that had driven them to breaking point, and to apportion blame. For instance, in 1750, John Stracey was found hanging with a note addressed to his wife in his pocket, which partly reads: "This is to acquaint you, that you are the fatal cause of this action; your behaviour to me had drove me distracted. We might have lived happily, and in credit, had your conduct been like mine. I hope the man who has been the cause of it, will think of this sad catastrophe."[11] This is a note fuelled by anger and spite, aiming—first and foremost—to inflict shame with a parting barb at his apparently-adulterous wife. Others accepted blame, seeking absolution for their own sins, both past and imminent. In 1770, the *Gentleman's Magazine* reports of a woman receiving this harrowing letter from her guilt-ridden husband, who had gone to tend his garden in Islington: "Dear wife, before this reaches you I shall be no more: The weight of my misfortunes, which I have brought upon myself by my criminal intercourse with Mrs. D. I am not able to bear any longer . . . Farewel [sic], for ever. From him who was once an indulgent husband." Rushing to prevent the tragedy, she found him "hanging in his own summerhouse quite dead."[12] Authors citing infirmity often sought clemency. Joseph White, who committed suicide by a pistol shot aimed under his right ear, left a note specifying illness which had made life "a vast burden and pain" and seeking "forgiveness of the act and all my former sins, through the merits of Jesus Christ." White also had the presence of mind to address his domestic responsibilities—"My boy's trunk and cloaths are up stairs, which please to let him have"—another common psychological step for authors embarking on a journey to the undiscovered country.[13]

Other suicidal authors preferred to address more immediate and secular arbiters of justice: coroners. Although punitive laws were far from rigidly applied to *felones de se* by the latter half of the eighteenth century, religious penalties—which were often coupled with customs of physical mutilation—were legally decreed in England until 1823, while the penalty of forfeiture lingered until 1870.[14] Evidently, they remained a legitimate concern for suicidal authors. In 1776, for example, a saddler by the name of Skelton ineffectually cut his throat at Congleton, Cheshire; taking five hours to expire, he had ample time to call for pen and ink to plead his case to his prospective coroner: "I am to let you know, that I was not right when I did this: take care to serve God as you ought." The coroner's inquest brought in a verdict of lunacy.[15] Conversely, a German gentleman Jacob Miers, who cut his throat after a violent dispute in 1772, was ineffectual in his appeal for mercy. Requesting a proper burial near Bethnal Green, Miers's opening statement was poorly chosen for his purpose: "Gentlemen, you need not give yourselves any trouble: I was in my right mind and senses when I did the Deed." The coroner agreed: Miers was adjudged *felo de se*, and buried facing the poor-house in Portugal Street.[16]

These examples offer some insight into authorial constructions of the suicidal experience. Most of these authors seem to portray themselves as victims, beaten down by oppressive domestic, social, or medical conditions. Taking the

time to explain mitigating circumstances, then, is crucial to claims of victimisation (those not concerned by such claims tended more toward brevity). By corollary, "victims" attempt to avoid full responsibility for their own death, often gesturing toward other people or events as underlying causes. Furthermore, they appear to establish a suicidal persona, a version of the self that has been altered or disordered by certain conditions, and subsequently attempt to revive images of their former self, as—apropos to the examples above—men of good conduct and credit, indulgent husbands, and attentive fathers. While narratives of victimization are central to further appeals for forgiveness and compassion, they also double as persuasives for lunacy by delineating a distinction between the temporary, liminal suicidal self and the more authentic former self.

What is surprisingly missing in most of these notes is any direct representation of anguish. Although some of these notes certainly attempt to incite sentimental response, the self-pitying rhetoric we find in contemporaneous fiction is noticeably absent. The notes are certainly devices of literary self-fashioning, but constructions of the self appear entirely dependent upon the reconstruction of communal ties and social context, as opposed to emotional introspection. Social bonds are actively reformed and redefined according to the authors' terms, as if to set the record straight for posterity; seemingly loving and respectable relationships, for instance, are cited as sources of emotional turmoil, or recast as broken or obsolete, while clandestine relationships—especially of a sexual or criminal nature—are openly declared. New posthumous relations are also established by these notes, especially those that seek legal intervention or sympathy from their imagined reader(s). Given the commonplace perceptions of suicidal despair as an utterly isolating experience, followed by the physical removal of the self from society, the active self-fashioning at the point of writing, based largely on the re-contextualisation of the self within the wider community, is rather counterintuitive. Far from being brief, cliché-ridden letters with little consequence outside of their immediate audience, suicide notes during this period are complicated literary exercises, often replete with a complex array of rhetorical postures and diversions. They are designed to refashion the unsociable suicidal self into a persona potentially rehabilitated by, and inscribed within, social memory.

An interesting case in point is that of Mungo Campbell's suicide. Campbell was a Scottish gentleman, loyal to the Crown in the Jacobite uprising of 1745, and later appointed an officer of the excise as reward for his dutiful service. In October 1769, Campbell and Alexander Montgomerie, the politically-progressive and divisive 10th Earl of Eglinton, became embroiled in a tragic dispute over Campbell's right to carry arms on Eglinton's property in Ayrshire, with Eglinton fatally wounded by a—some say accidental—shot from Campbell's firearm. The subsequent murder trial created quite a public stir, likely fuelled by political undertones.[17] Campbell's vigorous and public defence no doubt helped to sustain public interest; with the help of John Maclaurin, Lord Dreghorn, he published "a short account of himself, his family and conduct," *Information for Mungo Campbell*, while imprisoned in Edinburgh's Tolbooth. Guarding against "egregious misrepresentations" of his character, it portrays Campbell as "a man of a peacable [sic] disposition, of much humanity, and sensibility of temper." Evidently, though, Campbell was already acutely aware of the likely outcome of his trial:

> To die in any way is a serious matter. To die in the manner with which he is threatened is dreadful; but the panel is not so much afraid of death, in any shape, as to be willing to purchase life at the expence [sic] of a lie deliberately and judicially told. When therefore the circumstances in which he stands are considered, the simple annals of his life will be read by the just with attention, by the humane with feeling, nor should grandeur itself peruse them with disdain.[18]

Here, Campbell is framed as a Scottish Cato, a willing martyr for truth and liberty. Suicide already seems to be determined as preferable to hanging should a guilty verdict be declared, as a dignified way of retaining agency over the terms of his own life. Campbell's life is also already imagined as a past one, as attention turns to a legacy founded on a sense of justice and sympathetic humanity. True to expectations, Campbell was convicted of murder and was sentenced to death by hanging and subsequent dissection; he hanged himself on the night of his sentencing, circumventing an inglorious public execution and the indignity of anatomization. Covering the suicide, London's *Lloyd's Evening Post* reported the existence of "a very affecting letter" written by Campbell found at the death scene, devoted solely to his wife; the letter was printed in London's *Independent Chronicle* one week later:

> You will find, my long and faithful companion, I have kept my word with you—Since I must die because I would not surrender my arms to a tyrannic Lord, I am resolved to avoid being a public spectacle—'Ere you receive this I am no more. May every happiness attend you on earth, and may we meet in eternity, is the earnest wish of your's [sic] even in death,
> *Tolbooth, Feb. 24.* MUNGO CAMPBELL[19]

Opinion over the Campbell case, and more particularly Campbell's character, was divided. Included in this same report is a brief biographical sketch provided by a correspondent that serves to highlight the strength of Campbell's character, especially his rise from childhood adversity and his loyal military service; in a following issue of the *Independent Chronicle*, a respondent is more circumspect in his evaluation: Campbell was "good-natured" and "humane" on one hand, yet "passionate, proud and resentful" on the other.[20] After a secret and proper burial in Edinburgh, the location of Campbell's body was discovered and disinterred by an anonymous mob who, it is reported, "committed some insults on it,"[21] perhaps incensed by the double injustice of a convicted criminal escaping his legally-decreed sentence and the prospect of peaceful rest for the body of a suicide. Campbell's friends soon intervened by carrying his body to Leith, laying it in a small boat, and sinking it in the Firth of Forth. On top of widespread coverage in the press, a transcript of *The Trial of Mungo Campbell* and *A Dialogue of the Dead: betwixt Lord Eglinton and Mungo Campbell* were also swiftly published in London. As the *Dialogue* observes, the Campbell case was "an event, in its nature and circumstances altogether as extraordinary, perhaps, as occurred at any time in this country" (remembering, of course, that this case preceded the scandal of Martha Ray's murder at the hands of the suicidal James Hackman in 1779).[22] However, more intriguing than the scandal itself was the way in which it was quickly whitewashed. As early as March 10, the *Westminster Journal* reports that a subscription for Campbell's wife had been established; by early May, the *Independent Chronicle* declares that

> in consequence of a petition, signed by several persons of reputation, in favour of the widow of Mungo Campbell, and recommending her as a woman of blameless life, and a most deserving object of compassion, that the present Earl of Eglington [sic] has, with a dignity becoming of a noble mind, granted the unhappy woman a pension for life.[23]

There is far more happening here than one initially suspects. At face value, Campbell's suicide note, as originally printed in the *Independent Chronicle*, is presented with little context; the note is preceded by a cursory introduction, and followed by the brief biographical sketch. Campbell's suicide is not placed in the context of his criminal trial, but nor was there a need to, given the publicity it had attracted; public discourse provided for any lack of narrative context offered by the printer. And much like the fictional Chateaubriant above, the consensus of this public discourse was to establish Campbell as a flawed tragic hero: noble, charitable, and passionately loyal, a tendency that also appears to have underpinned the propensity for inflexible zealousness which proved to be his downfall. *A Dialogue of the Dead* reinforces this view, depicting Campbell as a self-appointed champion of individual liberty who refused to forfeit his property to "a man intoxicated with the insolence of what is called superior birth" and who would not resign his life to the court.[24] This characterisation is also supported by Campbell's suicide note. Campbell evidently did not expect compassion for his own plight and his note expertly conceals his final act by deflecting all attention to his loving wife, declaring not only his undying devotion to her but also his own tender heart. In the absence of an official coronial inquest—they were not conducted in Scotland—this letter in part initiates a quasi-public inquest conducted via the press, sustained by subsequent representations testifying to his moral standing and noble character. The issue was not whether Campbell was *felo de se* or *non compos mentis*, but whether he acted in a manner becoming of a gentleman of virtue and sensibility. And the community appears to have judged in his favor. All traces of Campbell's self-murder, and his absolute and irreparable rejection of society and its laws, are virtually eradicated in later discussions of his death and its aftermath. Central to the positive remembrance of Campbell is the image of his grieving widow, initiated by his suicide note and adopted by the community as a reparable humanitarian crisis which could be alleviated by the intervention of sympathetic hearts and benevolent minds. The resultant history of Mungo Campbell's suicide is a palimpsest: the violence of his act is erased, his offending corpse judiciously removed, and both are replaced with a more palatable humanitarian cause, effecting some form of collective closure and the social rehabilitation of the Campbell family. This is a case of trial by media: posthumous judgment administered not by traditional forms of authority such as God, the church, or the law, but by public sentiment transmitted through the press and largely instigated by Campbell's suicide note.

Campbell's polite performance as a sentimental hero exemplifies how the late eighteenth-century suicide note could animate feeling as an active agent of social virtue and circumvent conventional codes of morality. Indeed, for David Hume, "Morality . . . is more properly felt than judg'd of" and "sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions."[25] But it takes a particular kind of performance, or a certain degree of literariness, to achieve this. While Fincham and others observe that to "create, repair and extend social relationships," suicide notes must generally

function to some degree as a "performance of sanity," such strategies were a risky business during this period; see Jacob Miers above, for instance, whose lucidity resulted in an undignified burial. The plea for sanity was limited, but the rhetoric of sensibility could open new opportunities. What Campbell appears to exemplify is the way a suicidal author wishing to cultivate sympathy—or more precisely, fellow-feeling—must proleptically and mimetically adopt a pose that both signals and reflects his or her desired reaction, a sentimental posture for a sentimental response. This is a performative strategy taken straight from the leaves of contemporary sentimental fiction.[26] But for suicidal authors, it is also a strategy that brings into stark relief the fictive origins of affective response, despite the reality of the suicidal experience.

Such literary performances conceal the grim reality typical of the suicidal experience—namely, acute despair and the prospect of bodily violence. "[H]owever coolly it may sometimes be executed"—or may appear by way of representation—suicide "can never be resolved upon but with the greatest Agony and Distress to the unhappy Perpetrator," as one eighteenth-century correspondent notes.[27] And as another correspondent dares to contemplate, "if a suicide could for a moment recover life, and view himself mangled, as he lay with his brains scattered on the walls, and his blood streaming on the floor, with his remaining features distorted to agony—how he would shudder at himself and tremble at his own appearance!"[28] Though the tragedy of suicide is a worthy cause for sympathetic affection, pain and violence in full view is unlikely to elicit sympathy, as recognised by Henry Mackenzie: "in fancied sufferings, the drapery of the figure hides its form . . . real distress, coming in a homely and unornamented state, disgusts the eye, which had poured its tears over the hero of tragic misery, or the martyr of romantic woe."[29] Set in this context, the suicide note emerges as the despairing author's opportunity to decorate their tale of woe with the ornaments of fiction in an effort to temper abhorrence and approbation and to promote compassion by geniality. To manage this equilibrium between disguise and disclosure, the suicidal author must tread a fine line *between* fiction and reality, glossing over the psychological and physical horrors of suicide in favor of a representation that overtly courts a pathetic response. It's a delicate balancing act that echoes Lord Kames's notion of the "ideal presence" and its dissolution of the boundary between fiction and truth: "if, in reading, ideal presence be the means by which our passions are moved, it makes no difference whether the subject be fable or reality. When ideal presence is complete . . . . We never once reflect whether the story be true or feigned."[30] The already vexed question of veracity, then, is further complicated by literary performance. While Michael MacDonald's claim that suicide narratives "placed the scene of death vividly before the reader" remains largely valid,[31] these notes often attempted to conceal by literary means the most unpalatable aspects of the suicidal impulse.[32] Polite performances such as Campbell's were neither fictional nor genuine, but delicately poised between the two.

Suicide notes of this nature became the focal point at which two contemporary programs aimed at civil advancement converged: on one hand, the suicidal author provoked a sense of humanism and charity at an individual level, by way of a sentimental transaction between the dead author and the living reader; on the other, by virtue of publication in the press, this affective transaction was rep-

licated by the thousands, producing a genuinely communal experience of reading a common text. The emotional response to such notes was, at once, both inherently individualistic and community-building. Suicide notes provoked individual sensibilities *en masse*, on a popular scale. As Mungo Campbell's case illustrates, an imagined community of readers joined by a shared reading experience made active communal charity possible. Moreover, printed suicide notes that concealed profound suffering helped to create a benign space for sentimental sociability. Suicide notes arguably reinforce patterns of social dysfunction "by offering polite society the opportunity to congratulate itself on its compassionate posture towards evil of its own creation;" in essence, what one correspondent in 1774 likens to "a System of polite Devilism."[33] The congenial capacities of fiction, as Thomas Keymer astutely observes, highlight symptoms of social and economic inequality while effacing the underlying causes.[34] As sentimental vignettes, polite suicide notes of the period operate to conceal the physical and psychological torture of self-destruction, the social origins of this extreme unsocial behavior, and the utter irrevocability of the deed. Without the disguising aids of fiction, published suicide notes remain uncomfortably public notices where the failures of society are writ large.

## ADIEU VAIN WORLD!

That suicide notes can alternatively be read as dangerously public declarations of antisocial violence is not lost on some readers, as demonstrated by the case of Philip James O'Neil. In August 1771, this young Irishman shot himself in the head with a pistol and reportedly left nearly forty letters to friends and acquaintances, including one addressed to a close friend requesting publication in the papers; the *Westminster Journal*, among others, obliged.[35] O'Neil attempts to proleptically address the objections of Christian readers, but the response from moral conservatives was predictably swift. The *London Evening Post*, which also published O'Neil's letter, published a pseudonymous response signed by "Tranquillus," who with "great astonishment" attempted to correct the young man's grossly erroneous justifications. Tranquillus concludes this letter with a firm caution: "But consider, O ye youth of England, that the way to ruin is extravagance, and if you follow the example of this unhappy self-deceiver, you can never see the glory of God with eternal consolation."[36] Similar responses to O'Neil's letter are expressed elsewhere: in *Hoey's Dublin Mercury*, "Benevolus" also proposes "the publication of such a letter will be, by way of precedent, dangerous to weak minds," alluding to the epidemiological capacities of the printed word.[37] There are three important considerations stemming from this exchange. The frequency of reported suicides and suicide notes in the press had by the latter half of the century become an increasing source of unease to conservative readers and commentators. The countering response, channelled through the very same newspapers and magazines, instigated a battle for the reader's conscience as a necessary part of a sociological strategy to prevent imitative behaviour. Although O'Neil, Tranquillus, and Benevolus grapple with the nuances of free will within a providential Christian cosmos, it is not the favour or judgment of God they seek, nor do they seek clarification by disputing points of law; it is, instead, the heart and mind of the reader that they seek to win over. With the elevation of the reader as the primary arbitrator come questions about the suitability of the reader to preside over the act as an amateur adjudicator.

While Benevolus argues that "madmen argue right from wrong principles," resulting in what Tranquillus reads as a "medley of nonsense," O'Neil defiantly anticipates such objections: "let them talk and bark, my reason convinces me of the contrary." From the outset, O'Neil questions the capacity of conservatives like Tranquillus and Benevolus, and indeed the capabilities of any reader, to judge his situation.

It is in such examples where oppositional lines are drawn between author and reader that the paradoxically counter-social and pathological tendencies of sensibility begin to emerge. In June 1774, John Upson hanged himself after being detained at Norwich Castle for a felony, penning one of the more colourful farewell notes of the period in the pages of his prayer book:

> Farewel [sic], vain World, I've had enough of thee,
> And now am careless what thou say'st of me;
> Thy Smiles I court not, nor thy Frowns I fear,
> My Cares are past, my Heart lies easy here;
> What faults they find in me take Care to shun,
> And look at home, enough is to be done.
> Poor John the Glover, June 26, 1774.[38]

Despite his appellation, "Poor John" does not play the sentimental hero, the victim or the outcast here. Evidently worn down by the weight of social expectations, Upson is instead defiant, reasserting his agency at the very end by actively rejecting the world, by both pen and rope. He has no desire for sympathy or posthumous social rehabilitation; his final line caustically turns the tables on his reader, confidently advising that corrective measures are best directed towards the self. Similarly, in 1778, the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* printed an excerpt of a suicide note written by "a young, dissipated spendthrift," and translated by a correspondent living in France:

> Farewell, ye detested tribe of my fellow-creatures; I leave you for ever; I owe nothing; nor do I care how my carcase may be used after my death. The first to whom it may become troublesome, will be well repaid by sinking it in the bowels of the earth, to which it naturally belongs.[39]

These lines are drenched with disdain, pointing to a desire to utterly remove all ties to the world and its inhabitants, as well as the absolute eradication of the psychological, social, and biological self. Such examples serve to remind us that, as G. J. Barker-Benfield observes, the culture of sensibility paradoxically engendered an "antiworldview" that manifested in a retreat into the grave and "the devaluation of 'the world.'"[40] One is reminded of the final portrait of sensibility in the penultimate lines of Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*: "every nobler feeling rises within me! every beat of my heart awakens a virtue!—but it will make you hate the world."[41] Weary of battling against the world for social inclusion, these authors instead proudly shun the petty trivialities of society as self-proclaimed champions of the anti-world. In a further example, Thomas Davers's suicide note artfully exhibits grief and scorn in equal measure. Tracing his decline from social distinction, his final lowly station is exemplified by the limited and un-gentlemanlike means by which to dispose of himself:

> Descended from an ancient and honourable family, I have, for fifteen years past, suffered more indigence than ever gentleman before submitted to: neglected by my acquaintance, traduced by my enemies, and insulted by the vulgar, I am so reduced, worn down, and tired, that I have nothing left but that lasting repose, the joint and *dernier* inheritance of all.
> Of laudanum an ample dose,
> Must all my present ills compose:
> But the best laudanum of all
> I want (not resolution) but a ball.
>
> N. B. Advertise this. T. D. [42]

Irrespective of the ambiguity of "resolution," read as either a state of resolve in the face of adversity or a solution to his predicament, Davers sees no future prospects on earth, and with the final flourish of his pen provocatively demands the punishing world's attention—"Advertise this"—before thrusting his farewell note squarely between its metaphoric eyes. In each of these examples, the suicide note emerges as a significant marker of the moment sensibility as dignified virtue descends into a maelstrom of resentment.

Part of this oppositional stance to the world is an emphasis on the utter distinctiveness of the author's experience. Like Davers, who claims that he suffered like no gentleman before, S. Warin—who shot himself in Spa, Germany—is pointed in his claim for utter subjectivity:

> I do not think there exists in the world a man of my age who has experienced so many misfortunes, and even if there did, that would afford no ground for blaming my conduct. . . .
>
> Many people will accuse me of weakness, and exclaim in accents of commiseration, "the poor wretch had not courage to support the burthen of existence." To this I shall offer only one answer, either the persons who use this language have not experienced as many misfortunes as I have, and therefore are not competent judges of my situation, or even if they have, they are blessed with more fortitude of mind than I possess, which cannot be deemed my fault, as it is rather my misfortune than my crime. . . .[43]

Warin presents himself as a victim of disease, subject to his inherently fragile constitution—an affliction beyond his control or design—and vulnerable to misfortunes acted upon him rather than liable for any misconduct acted by him. His note presents sensibility as a malignant precursor to the "antiworldview." Mackenzie's La Roche declares sensibility as "the weakness of humanity," and as Mackenzie later adds, the heart open to this weakness will "enjoy the duties of humanity," but this is not the path of the young Warin, or Goethe's Werther, or any of the other suicides presented in this section.[44] Instead, they fulfil Smith's portrait of the tragic sentimental hero:

> There is a helplessness in the character of extreme humanity. . . . We only regret it is unfit for the world, because the world is unworthy of it, and because it must expose the person who is endowed with it as a prey to the perfidy and ingratitude of insinuating falsehood, and to a thousand pains and uneasiness, which, of all men, he the least deserves to feel, and which generally too he is, of all men, the least capable of supporting. [45]

Adopting this pose as a casualty of a debilitating sensibility, Warin's identity threatens to be subsumed by type. He is another Harley, Werther, or Saint-Preux, highly susceptible to distress and embittered by the world. But Warin's sensibility is also a source of egotism, elevating his self above common humanity and obstructing the possibility of fellow-feeling. By claiming the utter subjectivity of his experience and thereby disputing the capacity of his reader to competently judge or sympathise, he haughtily withdraws into a lonely solipsistic space from which death is the only escape, reasserting his individuality in the only way remaining. These examples illustrate the paradoxical opposition of acute sensibility to the social bonds of sympathy and sentimental affection, posing a supreme challenge to the sentimental reader.

## THE PROBLEM WITH SYMPATHY

Written at the borders of human experience, suicide notes in the mid- to late-eighteenth-century popular press challenge their readers to varying degrees. Some do not seek affective response. Others appear to be written by authors willing to facilitate sentimental response as their final chance of absolution or recognition, whereas some actively rail against such responses, perhaps signalling the Romantic scepticism towards sympathy.[46] Broadly speaking, however, the escalation of psychological trauma expressed in sentimental fiction from the middle of the eighteenth century appears to be shared in this small body of printed suicide notes. Warin's letter is published in the same year as the first English translation of *Werther* and both texts present the sentimental reader with the same quandary. In presenting subjective accounts of acute trauma, they provide the ultimate test of the reader's capability to understand and to feel. Like the doomed Werther, who believes it his fate to be misunderstood, Warin's note implies that true comprehension of his experience is restricted only to those who share his constitution and suffer intolerably as he does. In a correspondent's "Thoughts on Suicide" printed in *The Sentimental Magazine*, this degree of identification is commended as the ideal sympathetic response:

> To minds replete with philanthropic principles . . . to minds like these whom nature has made her children of sensibility the most exquisitely attenuated, what subjects of unspeakable anguish are the frequent acts of suicide. . . . *Christian benevolence* should teach us to weigh well the efficient springs to the commission of such an act, and instead of passing a damnatory censure, render their perceptions ours, then draw an inference favourable to the contingent frailties of mortality, and consonant to the goodness, equity and mercy, of the God of immortality.[47]

The problem with this—especially from the perspective of moral guardians and conservative commentators—is that any admission to such heightened sensitivity is also an admission to the very same emotional fragility that renders one susceptible to self-destruction. "[T]his extreme sympathy with misfortunes which we know nothing about," as Smith suggests, "though it could be attained, would be perfectly useless, and could serve no other purpose than to render miserable the person who possessed it."[48] Whereas the likes of Mungo Campbell are able to provide a safe, literary space for the rehearsal of both individual and communal sympathy,

attempting to indulge in sympathetic fantasy with those resistant to sentimental exchange is a more risky affair, and success is fraught with mortal danger. The question remained for contemporaries as to whether sympathy for the dejected, to "render their perceptions ours," enabled a hazardous form of suicidal contagion, transmitted and replicated *en masse* by text. Certainly, the authorities who attempted to censor Goethe's *Werther* in Saxony, Denmark, and Milan thought so.

The publication of suicide notes during this period was a practice that cut to the heart of the eighteenth-century anxiety over the real effect of literary representations of self-destruction (one that, incidentally, still occupies the efforts of sociologists today). While suicidal authors invoked and initiated contemporary models of sensibility to achieve desired ends, some effects may have been less predictable. For many, this was problematic, compounded, no doubt, by dissemination via the press; sensibility on a popular scale had its social rewards, but it also risked the spread of social disease. In view of this, not only do these suicide notes collectively form an alternative literary history that haphazardly traces the evolution of sensibility from a moral discourse into its paradoxical mutation as a form of pathology, they also mark an important early example of the distinctly modern concern over the suicidological implications of print and literary representation, all the while occupying the interstitial space between—and provocatively probing at—the limits of fiction and reality.

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NOTES

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1. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1902), 2:436.

2. Janet Todd, "Suicide and Biography," *Comparative Criticism* 25 (2004): 59.

3. For more on suicide notes from a sociological perspective, see Ben Fincham, et al., *Understanding Suicide: A Sociological Autopsy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 85–106.

4. *Public Advertiser*, 26 Apr. 1774, [2].

5. Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy discovered over seventy eighteenth-century suicide notes in total, including unprinted notes found in coronial records and private papers; *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 326–27.

6. Barbara M. Benedict uses this term to describe episodes excerpted from sentimental novels and published in literary miscellanies; see *Framing Feeling: Sentiment and Style in English Prose Fiction 1745–1800* (New York: AMS Press, 1994), 6–8.

7. *Whitehall Evening Post or London Intelligencer*, 6–8 Aug. 1761, [1]. For more on the historical basis of Chateaubriant's doomed love for Mademoiselle de Foix, see Nathaniel William Wraxall, *The History of France, under the Kings of the Race of Valois*, 2 vols. (London, 1785), 1:210–11.

8. *The Town and country magazine, or, Universal repository of knowledge, instruction, and entertainment*, Jan. 1770, 32–33, in *The History of Suicide in England, 1650–1850*, eds. Mark Robson et al., 8 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 6:177–79.

9. MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 325.

10. For such claims see Todd, "Suicide and Biography," 59; Ben Fincham, et al., *Understanding Suicide*, 85–87.

11. *Gentleman's Magazine* 20 (1750): 473.

12. *Gentleman's Magazine* 40 (1770): 538.

13. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 16–18 Oct. 1765, 378.

14. MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 346–47. Clare Gittings comments: "It was, no doubt, the extreme brutality of the traditional burial rites for suicides which led some clergy to be lenient towards the bodies of these unfortunates," in *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London; Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), 74. For examples of *felones de se* buried in highways with stakes driven through their bodies during this period, see *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 17–19 Jul. 1766, [4]; *Middlesex Journal or Chronicle of Liberty*, 6–8 Feb. 1772, [3]; *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 5 Jan. 1779, [3].

15. *London Evening Post*, 22–25 Jun. 1776, [3].

16. *Middlesex Journal or Universal Evening Post*, 1–3 Oct. 1772, [3]; and 3–6 Oct. 1772, [3]. For further reports see *General Evening Post*, 29 Sept.–1 Oct. 1772, [3]; *Daily Advertiser*, 2 Oct. 1772, [1]. The opening lines of the note—found in Westminster Inquisition records (Jacob Miers, 2 Oct 1772) and accessible in *London Lives 1690–1800* (londonlives.org)—reads differently from the reported version: "As it is customary for the coroner in this country to sit on the body, not to give you troubles know as I am in my senses and to[o] sensible of the most horrid crime I am [going] to commit to offend my just God." These differences prompt questions regarding the accuracy and reliability of methods used to print suicide notes.

17. Andrew McKillop notes that "bad electoral blood between the Montgomeries and Loudoun Campbells [may have] formed a subtext to the strained relationship" and the fatal encounter; see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* s.v. "Montgomerie, Alexander, tenth earl of Eglinton (1723–1769)."

18. *Information for Mungo Campbell* (Edinburgh: 1770), 5–6. The Scottish legal term "panel" refers to the "person or persons indicted before a court; the accused;" see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "panel," 15a.

19. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 5–7 Mar. 1770, 230; *Independent Chronicle*, 12–14 Mar. 1770, [4].

20. *Independent Chronicle*, 19–21 Mar. 1770, [2].

21. Ibid.

22. *A Dialogue of the Dead: betwixt Lord Eglinton and Mungo Campbell. To which is added a genuine abstract of the trial of Mungo Campbell* (London, 1770), 42.

23. *Independent Chronicle*, 4–7 May 1770, [2].

24. *A Dialogue of the Dead*, 13, 5–6.

25. David Hume , *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 470, 618.

26. Ildiko Csengei cites the beggar and the madman in Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1770) as fictional examples of this calculated posture, observing that "The world of the mad needs to speak the language of sensibility in order to claim recognition." *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 137.

27. *St. James Chronicle,* 10 Aug. 1780; see *History of Suicide*, 6:305.

28. *Town and Country Magazine*, 4 (1772): 573; see *History of Suicide*, 6:263.

29. *The Lounger* 28 (1785): 109; cf. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 287 (VII.ii.1.34), 30 (I.ii.1.9).

30. Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh; London, 1762), 1:114. MacDonald and Murphy uphold Kames' position, observing that the authenticity of printed suicide notes during the period was of "little consequence in studying the ways in which suicides represented their own deaths" (*Sleepless Souls*, 325).

31. Michael MacDonald, "Suicide and the Rise of the Popular Press in England," *Representations* 22 (1988): 51.

32. Cf. Paul Goring's remarks on "the sick of sensibility" as "conventionally the most sanitary of patients," whose illness is "codified for the purposes of eloquent effect;" *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth–Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 160.

33. *Morning Chronicle,* 28 Nov. 1774, in *History of Suicide*, 6:279.

34. Thomas Keymer, "Sentimental fiction: ethics, social critique and philanthropy," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 591.

35. *Westminster Journal and London Political Miscellany*, 3–10 Aug. 1771, [2]. For other London examples, see *Middlesex Journal or Chronicle of Liberty*, 6–8 Aug. 1771, [2]; *London Evening Post*, 6–8 Aug. 1771, [2]; for Dublin, see *Hoey's Dublin Mercury*, 10–13 Aug. 1771, [1]. For a second of O'Neil's letters, see *General Evening Post*, 6–8 Aug. 1771, [1].

36. *London Evening Post*, 24–27 Aug. 1771, [2].

37. *Hoey's Dublin Mercury*, 15–17 Aug. 1771, [2].

38. *Public Advertiser*, 5 Jul. 1774, [4].

39. *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 24 Sept. 1778, [1].

40. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 223.

41. Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers, rev.ed. (1967; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 133.

42. *Gentleman's Magazine* 37 (1767): 93; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 186. The suicide note was also employed as a means of social climbing: MacDonald and Murphy cite the unpublished example of the barely literate "E. H." and her "a Doue to all the World" as an attempt to imitate the polite language of printed suicide notes (325–26).

43. *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 9 Sept. 1779, [2].

44. *The Mirror* 44 (1779): 67; *The Mirror* 72 (1780): 327.

45. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 40 (I.ii.4.3).

46. Jonathan Lamb declares the Romantic resistance to sympathy as "the democratization of the security and privacy of the soul;" *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 39.

47. *Sentimental Magazine, or, General assemblage of science, taste, and entertainment* (Sept. 1775): 390–92. For a similar essay, cf. *Morning Chronicle* (21 Jul. 1778), in *History of Suicide*, 6:289.

48. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 140 (III.3.9).