Unfelt
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Introduction

Unfelt Affect

The word *insensibly* recurs with strange persistence in British prose of the age of sensibility. “A thousand occasional meetings,” says Frances Burney’s heroine in *Evelina* (1778) of her growing feelings for Orville, “could not have brought us to that degree of social freedom, which four days spent under the same roof have, insensibly, been productive of.”¹ In this book, I consider the meanings and uses of these recurrences and related idioms in Enlightenment prose. The word has struck me as suggestive from the time I started reading a lot of eighteenth-century literature in graduate school. It seemed “poetic,” even romantic, somehow—evoking (to use Burney’s word) a *productive* movement of feeling that cannot itself be felt, attended to, or defined while it is happening. Such resonances put me on alert, and I noticed the term wherever it came up, in eighteenth-century literature or not. Any version I happened on, for instance, of the popular French ballad “*Insensiblement*,” written by Paul Misraki during World War II, caught my ear: “*Insensiblement vous vous êtes glissée dans ma vie, / Insensiblement vous vous êtes logée dans mon cœur*” (“Insensibly you have glided into my life, / Insensibly you have lodged in my heart . . .”—though I first heard Django Reinhardt’s wordless rendition recorded in 1953).

This peculiar combination—the unfelt emergence and motions of strongly felt feelings—appears all over eighteenth-century writing. “But, above all, in conversing with her,” writes Henry Brooke in his novel *The Fool of Quality* (1765–70), “the Music of her Accents, and the Elegance of her Sentiments fell insensibly on his Soul that drank them up, as a dry Ground drinks up the invisible Dew of the Evening.”² As I began to think about such locutions in a more deliberate way, I observed their occurrence in contexts well beyond novelists’ depictions of falling in love unawares. Philosophy, historiography, and political economy all make copious if discreet use of such terms, though in a way quite different from how some “keyword” or “complex word” would be
deployed.\textsuperscript{3} The usages express something deep but inexplicit about how affect was understood in the eighteenth century, how feeling, passions, the emotions, and even perception itself were seen subtly to come into existence and move people. Instead of drawing attention to itself as an especially significant, well-defined concept or idea, a word like \textit{insensibly} occurs almost in passing in the period’s writing. But this unstudied casualness, far from rendering its meaning insignificant, holds a key to its power. A scarcely noticed but crucial and consistent set of gestures to an affect that cannot be felt: that is the terrain this book explores.

The adverbial character of these terms, their association with action and change, specifies the idiom that interests me in this volume. Instead of indicating a mere lack of feeling—an affective blockage, impassivity, stupefaction—insensibly unfolding processes initiate and build strong feeling or make it possible. The adjectival form can evoke that too. Writers refer to the “insensible (or imperceptible) degrees” by which a feeling or perception intensifies and alters, an additive sense with an essentially temporal dimension. (In Samuel Johnson’s \textit{Dictionary of the English Language}, 1755, \textit{insensibly} is said to mean “by slow degrees.”)\textsuperscript{4} But the adjective also often \textit{does} refer to a mere lack of feeling, numbness, insensitivity. Brooke’s \textit{Fool of Quality} again: “Hannah stooped, in Haste, and applied Hartshorn to the Nose of the Woman, who appeared wholly insensible.”\textsuperscript{5} Here the term is strictly privative, describing someone who does not feel anything, and the heavy noun \textit{insensibility} tends to do the same. (I will say more about the grammar of these usages below.) Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe, for instance, declaims against the “barbarous insensibility” of any man unaffected by compassion on “proper occasions.”\textsuperscript{6} The privative dimension of such language—feeling muted or dampened—has been treated in a few scholarly accounts, in eighteenth-century studies and beyond.\textsuperscript{7} (And Fredric Jameson’s notion of the “waning of affect” in postmodern times has endured as a point of reference.)\textsuperscript{8} This book explores something like the opposite. Literature of the long eighteenth century consistently appeals to the insensible as a covertly burgeoning, narrative force, a movement from which sensibility emerges.

This introduction will outline the critical approach needed to understand this group of stylistic functions—the term \textit{ideas} would reify them too much—in eighteenth-century writing. The insensible allows writers in widely different areas of prose to describe feeling as involved in physical systems, temporal frameworks, and collectivities of movement that human beings subject to them do not feel. This subtle, secret layer of unfeeling could seem like an eighteenth-century analogue of the unconscious mind, before that concept had even begun to be invented. The unfelt undercurrent makes our felt lives the
way they are. This study will, however, indicate more consistently the limitations of this analogy than its strengths. More helpful to me will be ideas from affect theory, and especially the strand initiated by Gilles Deleuze, which defines the “nonconscious” dimensions of affect as different from the workings of the Freudian unconscious.9 (Freud’s exegetes, including Jacques Lacan, stress that Freud rejects the very possibility of unconscious affects, insisting that only mental contents—ideational representations, Vorstellungen—can properly be called unconscious.)10 Affect theory’s accounts of affective flows and feedback, the “subtlest of intensities,” the “miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed,”11 will help clarify what eighteenth-century appeals to the insensible have to say. But differences between the two will also emerge. Not a theory, not a set of names for isolatable states, forces, or even processes, the language of the insensible spreads unselfconsciously throughout writing in the period to designate an open variety of unfelt changes to feeling. But this variety has a shape.

The Logic of an Idiom

My sense as a reader of the distinctive prevalence of terms like insensibly in eighteenth-century prose turns out to be quantifiably verifiable. A Google Ngram search shows that usage of the word rose steeply and steadily (after some earlier spikes) from 1686 to a peak around 1786, then dropped off precipitously to where it is now (see figure 1).12 This is the roughly one-hundred-year period explored in this book. In parallel, my four chapters each attend to examples from early in this span—from philosophy, fiction, historiography, and political economy—and then focus on the rising peak during the age of sensibility, roughly 1745–90, and then point to what happened afterward.

The French case, relevant here because of the French influences on English writing that I discuss throughout, shows insensiblement on a slightly more jagged Ngram course, with peaks in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and a final one around 1795. But Misraki’s song notwithstanding, the decline in French matches the one in English, as usage in both falls steeply through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These graphs seem to present something in need of explanation. Written representations of the phenomenon of unfelt change themselves changed in some way in the 1780s or 1790s. Words like insensibly stopped being useful, and a different vocabulary emerged, with different emphases and implications, to take its place.

The root error that such basic word searches promote, however, is viewing a vast multitude of distinct, possibly incompatible facts—discrete instances
of usage—as if they were just one fact, a single, meaningful line sloping upward and then falling. In that form, they sometimes encourage those looking at them to propose a cause of the line’s shape, its rise and fall, perhaps in this case to identify some important event around 1790 that changed usage. As Matthew L. Jockers, a promoter of more sophisticated quantitative methods in the humanities, bluntly cautions, “when we examine a word, or an n-gram, out of the context in which it appears, we inevitably lose information about how that word is being employed.” And context is everything with a word like the adjectival form *insensible* because it has two opposite meanings, un-feeling (privative) and un-feeling (additive).

The history shown in lossy Ngram pictures, then, can be only a rough starting point. This book will explain the meaning of this pattern of usage by examining a sequence of examples in detail across disparate kinds of prose. The examples are related not only because they have a specific set of words in common but also because together they shape these words into an idiom, a common style of expression and thought put to certain uses. Though a philosophical account of a particle’s effect on the senses obviously differs from a novelistic description of a heroine’s insensibly changing feelings, these verbal gestures project a complex and consistent meaning across the period’s prose. Collectively the texts I survey will demonstrate not just that *insensibly* and like terms are words of the eighteenth century, as Ngram charts show. They will also reveal why. Far from an unintelligible spread of disconnected uses, this terminology specifically and concretely serves the period’s understanding of feeling.

It is important to recognize the unusualness of this claim at the outset. I am arguing that a seemingly casual idiom, which may at first glance seem like little more than a tic in Enlightenment prose style, acts like a concept, with specific content. The writing of the period does not consider or elaborate on the idiom’s semantic significance very fully, which is instead manifested in the way it acquires meanings in usage, especially in discourses centered on sensations, passions, and feelings. The idiom is an inconspicuous but load-bearing element of these discourses, allowing them to function as they do and solve the problems they set out to solve without drawing much attention to itself. The depth and consistency of its meaning—its logic—across the kinds of writing I treat in this book partly derive from three of its quasi-semantic features.

First, the close association between the insensible and the senses, throughout the different contexts that this book surveys, is striking. The structure of the word itself helps ensure this. By including the idea of sensation in its negation of it, the term remains in close proximity to feeling (unlike more neutral expressions such as “by slow degrees”). To call a process insensible is to
say two things about it, in a strongly ironic tension with each other: It cannot be felt, and it exists. Its existence presses, so to speak, its unfelt status into a position especially pertinent to what we eventually do come to feel. Instead of offering criticism of or a retreat from the era’s obsession with the passions and the sensing mind, the unfelt proves, again and again, to be that discourse’s enabling element. If a principal project of the age of sensibility is narrating the civilization of the appetites and passions, whether in individual cases (barbarous men in novels acquiring tender feelings) or in collective ones (rude peoples becoming polite), the insensible nature of the transformation consistently plays an indispensable part.

So Edward Gibbon writes of the Huns in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89): “Their manners were softened, and even their features were insensibly improved, by the mildness of the climate, and their long residence in a flourishing province.”¹⁴ Here sociable and physical softenings emerge, by unfelt degrees, together. Modern society also arrives at its peak of sensibility due to processes set in motion in preceding eras that cannot be sensed as they occur. David Hume, in the first published volumes of *The History of England* (1754–61), describes the climate of feeling at the turn of the seventeenth century: “about this period, the minds of men, throughout Europe, especially in England, seem to have undergone a general, but insensible revolution.”¹⁵ And again, the process he describes entwines material changes (in industry, commerce, navigation) with a refinement of feelings and manners. The insensible is used to mark the unseen point of the emergence of sensibility or permit the change from one order of feeling to another.

This mediating function of unfeeling is a second commonality among its occurrences in the long eighteenth century. Writers repeatedly use these terms as a kind of lubricant in narration, a way of getting from one state or situation to another that seems incompatible with it: indifference to love, barbarity to politeness. In chapter IV of this book I discuss how political economists portray the link, itself unfelt, between two affective states: the strong, often rather sordid passions (greed, envy, “self-liking,” vanity) that drive commerce, and their fortunate affective outcome, what Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) calls “the publick happiness.”¹⁶ The “silent and insensible operation” of international trade for Smith destroys feudalism and creates the more or less happy system of modern European commercial states. Similar idioms perform the role of mediator in quite different contexts.¹⁷ As chapter I describes, John Locke in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) postulates the existence of “insensible parts” of matter to mediate between the two halves of his most famous distinction: primary and secondary qualities. And in section 2 of chapter I, I show how the notion of a fantasy substance in the
brain radically unavailable to sense helps David Hartley mediate between what feels and what is felt, spirit and matter, the ultimate divide. Finally, what motivates the turn to *insensibly* is the need for a term to bridge personal, intense feeling to some opposite: the material body, a social collective, a historical pattern—in an era in which detailed scrutiny of all three of those things intensifies. The logic of the idiom, its reference to a potent but blank affect, movement, or power, makes it consistently useful to writers who seek to join states or conditions of being that otherwise seem incompatible.

A third widely evident aspect of the idiom, also built into its semantic structure, is its tendency to refer to a prepersonal component of affect. The adverb *insensibly* very often modifies the actions of slow processes that no one deliberately or otherwise personally performs. *Things* happen insensibly, to people. The idiom portrays people as objects of insensible processes rather than subjects of “insensible emotions.” So in the passage from Burney quoted at the beginning of this introduction, it is the “four days” that have been insensibly productive, not Evelina or Orville. In the one from Brooke, “Music” and “Elegance” act insensibly, and though the alluring Panthea performs these, she does not perform their insensible effect. They are insensible not because of the special way she does them but because of how such things work affectively in time. They produce profound effects on personal feelings precisely because they impersonally precede them. For this reason, we do not encounter personalities or literary characters distinguished by a tendency to act in an especially insensible way. When applied in adjectival form directly to a person, in fact, the term simply flips to its privative sense: “He was insensible to the music of her accents and the elegance of her sentiments.”18 He would then be understood merely as lacking sensibility, not as affected unawares by it (and so would join the class of notably impassive characters called “insensibles” by Wendy Anne Lee in her book *Failures of Feeling*, 2018).

These three elements of meaning are not deliberately worked up by any eighteenth-century novelist or philosopher into an elaborate concept. They instead arise naturally, we might say, from the idiom’s ordinary but complex grammar in usage. This most basically appears in the function of terms like *insensible* as what grammarians call noninherent adjectives, as opposed to inherent ones. An insensible man, again, does not feel, is in a stupor or is unable to sympathize with the sufferings of others. The adjective in that case is inherent because it applies to what he is himself. But this book focuses on the potential of the word as a noninherent adjective. In phrases like “a safe neighborhood” or “a melancholy necessity,” the adjective does not describe the noun inherently. The neighborhood itself is not safe from flood or fire, the necessity does not itself feel sad. Such adjectives point away, so to speak, from the
words they seem to modify. The necessity is melancholy because it affects somebody that way, and the streets are safe because of how a person—anybody—might feel walking on them. Describing a process as insensible likewise does not mean that the process itself does not feel. It means someone—but who?—does not feel it, even as it also indicates that something is happening. It is additive, not merely privative and, applying to the process, does not personalize itself, again, to the person who does not feel it.

If it seems simpler just to say that the adjective has two distinct meanings, in a tension with each other—unfeeling and unfelt—it is still evident that the second leaves the insensible profoundly unspecified in application. It is open, as it were, to the world. And the adverb expresses this openness even better. When, in one of the broad-brush, “philosophical” chapters of *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon declares that “the progress of manufactures and commerce insensibly collects a large multitude within the walls of a city,” we may ask, Insensibly to whom? And the answer could include the people gathering in the city, or the people still outside looking in, or anybody else—tax collectors, social commentators—in a position not to notice. Finally the answer could be, well, to nobody—not insensibly to anybody in particular, just insensibly in general. This indeterminacy, especially evident in the work of historians, expands human time beyond a reductive understanding of it as a sequence of events consciously experienced by particular people. The idiom’s pre- or nonpersonal character, its openness to the world, sentient and insentient, ensures that it works in ways resembling affect as described in certain theoretical discussions, as we shall see.

All this semantic richness makes the word useful to writers about feeling, but it attracts nothing like the self-conscious philosophical attention that the passions, sentiments, and sensibility do in the eighteenth century. Generally speaking, adverbs and adverbial phrases tend to be less theorized than nouns or classifying adjectives (such as *sentimental*). A *how* can seem less susceptible to systematic treatment than a *what* or a *what kind*. Often an abstract noun works in a theory to put a wide array of adverbs in order. So all the ways that things move through space—quickly, erratically, steadily, slowly—call forth a unified theory of gravity or “universal attraction.” There are no treatises in the period (that I know of) on “how things happen insensibly.” It is instructive in this respect to contrast the insensible with concrete cognitive phenomena like attention and distraction, which have been treated in studies of eighteenth-century literature and thought. A person can be distracted from or attentive to something, and mocked or praised for being so, but the insensible offers no such options. Its essence lies in its gestures to what is beyond notice, something “not discoverable by the senses,” as the definition of *insen-
sible in Johnson’s *Dictionary* has it. The word characterizes any unfolding and enfolding process, and only its privative sense refers to individuals’ cognitive states. (So references to the four days that affect Evelina and Orville, and to the progress that collects people in a city, are not meant to raise questions, satirical or otherwise, about their powers of attention, but rather comment on the peculiar way that passing time affects sensibility.) These features make the idiom resist scholarly attempts at conceptual history, the kind of *Begriffsgeschichte* in the style of Reinhart Koselleck. What I offer here is something like a conceptual history without a concept.

This lack, however, also provides an opportunity. Ordinary idioms and elements of style sometimes do profound work. Everyday talk, about ourselves and our feelings, reveals commitments to ways we look at ourselves in the world. It is wrong, I think, to call these commitments philosophical. But it is also wrong not to read ordinary language with care to help it tell us what we think. The relation of elements of common prose style to theoretical understanding or philosophy in any period takes many forms. In the eighteenth century, some fashionable terms first get elaborated in philosophy and criticism—*sublime*, for instance—and then find their way into common usage. A diary or poem will refer to a sublime scene or a sublime thought, and the relation of such utterances to authoritative critical definitions and elaborations can be discerned. In other cases—*taste*, for instance—a word appears first in common conversation, then undergoes a kind of discipline in periodical essays, literary criticism, philosophical treatises, and the like. So Joseph Addison begins his *Spectator* essay on taste, typically seen as an inaugural statement in the aesthetic tradition: “As this Word arises very often in Conversation, I shall endeavor to give some Account of it.” But then any reference to taste in the literature of the eighteenth century, no matter how casual, can be plotted against such painstaking accounts.

As my work on this study advanced, I realized that even if I discovered some extended commentary on insensible processes written in the period, it could not have served as the source or headwater of the examples and contexts that the term makes interesting. Even Locke’s account of an insensibly formed personal identity does not look like such a source, supremely influential though his *Essay* is. When Gibbon—the only author treated in this study whose addiction to the term *insensibly* has been widely remarked on by commentators—says early on in the *Decline and Fall* that “education and study insensibly inspired the natives of those countries [of the western barbarians] with the sentiments of Romans,” he does not “allude” to Locke or anybody else but rather employs a favorite stylistic device. In contrast, when a letter, a poem, or a periodical essay refers to “secondary qualities,” or mental “ideas,” we hear
a distinct and perhaps deliberately sounded Lockean note. The usage of the insensible, though consistently meaningful, is promiscuous and “horizontal”—heedless of evident disciplinary hierarchy and available to anybody who wants to talk about the effect that unfelt change has on something felt. It is more a fashionable idiom than a term of art.

I will show throughout this book how this idiom gets taken up in and enables diverse, sometimes incompatible ways of understanding feelings. These include material ones: Robert Boyle’s corpuscularianism; Isaac Newton’s “Æthereal Medium” introduced in the “Queries” to the *Opticks* (1706, 1730); Hartley’s postulation of special particles in the brain; the hydrostatic vocabulary that Hume adopts to discuss the flow of money, and so on. A mysterious quality pervades the contexts of natural science that make use of the idiom, but no single mechanical theory unites them all. The usage exceeds the particular theoretical contexts it serves, and the same goes for its role in less theorized enterprises like fiction, historiography, devotional literature, and other areas of prose. But it seems desperate to give up discussing the idiom’s sophisticated and consistent contributions to literary expression simply because it is discursively homeless or because we can find no single source of it, theoretical, technical, or otherwise. While the logic and grammar I have just outlined evoke a sense of the deep power of unfeeling to support feeling, the usages do not together compose a concept such as an eighteenth-century version of the unconscious mind. The idiom is too widely useful and contextually various to do that.

Attempts to recount the prehistory of the unconscious have sometimes turned to the eighteenth century. The tradition of understanding unconscious aspects of mental life is often said to originate with Franz Anton Mesmer’s experiments with animal magnetism.25 Peter Sloterdijk claimed in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) that “the illusion of a transparent human self-consciousness has been systematically destroyed” as the result of what Mesmerism began.26 As the 1785 report on Mesmerism to Louis XVI by Benjamin Franklin, Antoine Lavoisier, and others puts it, “The object of this system was a fluid extremely subtle, upon which were bestowed the magnificent titles of soul of the world, spirit of the universe, and universal magnetic fluid; and which was pretended to be diffused through the whole space occupied by the material creation, to animate the system of nature, to penetrate all substances, and to be the vehicle to animated bodies in general, and their several regions in particular, of certain forces of attraction and repulsion, by means of which they explained the phenomena of nature.”27 If the unconscious begins here, with the discovery of a particular occult substance,28 it constitutes a break with the idioms that depict unfelt change that are the subject of this book, which
lack any such “magnificent” fanfare or focus on some special subtle fluid. A system of expression that represents unnoticed passages of time gives way to a comprehensive theory of life and matter.

Mesmer made his appearance in English print right around the time, 1785, that the term insensibly began its fall into disuse. And while the term conscious appeared, of course, in important literary contexts before this point, it is at least worth noting that unconsciously began its conspicuous climb just when insensibly declined (see figure 2). Again, concrete examples and context matter more than such vague and often misleading pictures. I will comment in chapter II of this book on a change in Burney’s portrayals of her characters’ unnoticed affective motions, particularly on alterations to her techniques of antipsychological representation from Evelina (1778) to Cecilia (1782), a shift occurring slightly before the big drop-off indicated in Google Ngram. The more open idioms in Burney recede, and words more firmly anchored in the minds of individuals (involuntary, unconscious) come forward.

Probably every period has its own ways of recognizing, more or less explicitly, that much more goes into our feelings than what we consciously feel. Like theories of the unconscious would later do, the idioms of unfelt affect in the eighteenth century put “transparent human conscious” into question. But the logic of the idiom distinguishes it from what comes after. English users simply understood the insensible differently from the way we came to understand the unconscious and incorporate it into our views of our minds in later years. Representations of the unfelt aspects of mental life became less adverbial and more about nouns, more about theorized entities and specific kinds of mental processes underneath awareness. As we shall see, the insensible tends to modify not kinds of mental content but rather nonmental processes in the world that affect the mind and feelings.

Affective Genealogies

Scholars in the humanities who employ theories of affect now have also looked back more than a century before Mesmer for the articulation of some of their foundational concepts. Parts 2 and (especially) 3 of the Ethics (1677) of Baruch Spinoza have served as a principal source of inspiration in Gilles Deleuze’s influential account of affect, and theorists who follow this strand in Deleuze in effect follow Spinoza too. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg’s introduction to The Affect Theory Reader (2010) relays Spinoza’s dictum, “No one has yet determined what the body can do,” as an invitation to expand the theoretical


**Figure 2.** Jean-Baptiste Michel et al. “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books.” *Science* 331.6014 (2011): 176–82.
field. Spinoza’s antidualistic depiction of affect as investing and connecting bodies in fields of physical movement contrasts, as Deleuze and Félix Guattari indicate, with what they call “sentiment,” understood as mere “personal feeling.” Affect for Deleuze and his heirs extends beyond human emotion and mindedness to encompass all interactions among bodies: “A body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality.”

Deleuze will refine his definition of affect by noting that Spinoza uses two different Latin words for it—*affectio* and *affectus*—with distinct and complementary meanings. *Affectio* refers to a body’s physical encounter with another that affects its state, while *affectus* is a body’s own ongoing and ceaseless transitioning, from state to succeeding state, resulting from such encounters. As Deleuze puts it in a 1978 lecture at Vincennes on Spinoza, “Affectus in Spinoza is variation . . . continuous variation of the force of existing.” And in a lecture in 1981, describing the durations that the affectus comprises in all its variability, he notes that “in a sense, the duration is always behind our backs, it’s at our backs that it happens.” These definitions of *affectus* will help illuminate the insensibly unfolding processes, the tacit movements from state to state, that this book treats. Unlike an ensemble of subjective emotions, the *affectus* is a “prepersonal intensity” (in Brian Massumi’s gloss of the term) attending the body’s ceaseless variation. The insensible in British literature of the period exemplifies the nature of *affectus* as passage and variation at its most elusive and minute.

The so-called English Deists of the early eighteenth century—Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, and John Toland, among others—step forth as Spinoza’s most unambiguous heirs in Britain, and their accounts of the body resonate with this book’s theme. In his anticlerical tract *The Natural History of Superstition* (1709), John Trenchard, republican radical and associate of Collins and Toland, offers a remarkable account of mysterious, affective connections among bodies and their passions:

> Nature in many circumstances seems to work by a sort of secret Magick, and by ways unaccountable to us, and yet produces as certain, and regular events as the most obviously Mechanical Operations. Passions of the Mind, as well as Actions of the Body, are not only communicated by all the Senses, but probably by other ways indiscernible to us: . . . The Yawning of one Person infects a whole Company; the Tone, the Motions, the Gestures, and Grimaces of those we converse with steal insensibly upon us, even when we endeavour to avoid them; Not only Nations and Sects, but Professions, and particular Societies of Men for
the most part contract peculiar Airs, and Features, which are easily distinguishable to a nice observer, and one but of moderate skill in Phisiognomy [sic] will discover a Parson, a Quaker, or a Taylor, dress them how you please.  

The sense of mystery in Trenchard’s examples enlarges, in Spinozan fashion, our appreciation of what bodies can do. They influence each other by affection (affectio), and their passages and variations from one state to the next (as affectus) “steal insensibly upon us.” Social collectivities (sects, nations, professions) cohere according to the same forces that affect the states of individuals. And all this happens, Trenchard adds, “by a sort of natural Mechanism.” Here is the insensible as unfelt affect: an array of mechanical motions, notable for their variety, subtlety, and flexibility, that invest and exceed individual bodies and make social bodies possible.

But the novelists, historians, and philosophers discussed in this book who similarly appeal to the insensible are not so firmly in Spinoza’s orbit. The very commonness in English of the idiom of the insensible makes any lines of supposed influence from a comparatively little read and often reviled Dutch seventeenth-century philosopher seem beside the point. If the idiom somehow carries an obscure Spinozan residue unknown to those who employ it, the vitality that these usages have in common surpasses such influence. Some scholars moreover have set the English “moderate mainstream Enlightenment” of Locke and Newton, and the later Scottish one of Hume and Smith, against the “radical Enlightenment” promoted by Spinoza, though various affinities, between Hume and Spinoza, for instance, have sometimes been explored. It seems more productive to view the affective resonance of the idiom as arising from a more general set of intellectual practices and attitudes, of which a Spinozan openness to what the body can do is a part. An increasingly detailed attention in the period to a diversity of material anchors of sensate life—to particles and corpuscles, animal spirits, vibrations of nerves, vital and electric fluids—made bridging feeling and unfeeling a compelling task for dualists (as we will see with Hartley) and materialists (as with Hartley’s disciple Joseph Priestley) alike.

Apart from such issues of precedence and inheritance, the conceptual vocabulary of affect theory (including Spinoza’s affectus) helps illuminate the significance and effects of the idiom. What I have called the openness of the insensible to the world, its reference to processes of change often not referred to any particular mind or sensing being, resonates with the ways theorists say that affect works. As Seigworth and Gregg put it, in language heightened by their theoretical interests, affect is now commonly employed in “critical dis-
courses of the emotions (and histories of the emotions) that have progressively left behind the interiorized self or subjectivity... to unfold regimes of expressivity that are tied much more to resonant worldings and diffusions of feeling/passions—often including atmospheres of sociality, crowd behaviors, contagions of feeling.”46

The insensible suggests something like a contagion of unfeeling, in part by its grammatical noninherence. The not-feeling it designates is often not referred to any particular nearby mind, so it has a way of opening up to any and all available. Of course, when love insensibly affects someone (as in the passage quoted from Brooke’s *Fool of Quality*), we primarily think of the lover himself as not feeling it. But his beloved, as well as onlookers, “friends” of the couple, and others, may be understood as not sensing the onset too. Even the reader herself may be led by the idiom to look for earlier moments when her suspicion of their love began to creep unawares into her reading. As such the insensible can seem a specially novelistic effect. Other descriptions of (for instance) gradual historical change convey this openness even more. Since changes to a person, a group, a town, a region happen insensibly, there is no need to specify who exactly should be said not to sense them.

All such movements remain “positive” by virtue of their attachment to processes that actually produce or describe eventually experienced change. This dynamic interaction between unfelt potential and actual felt feeling finds analogues in the language of Massumi, who speaks of affect as “intensity” that may be “qualified”—arrested—as an identified and thereby felt emotion.47 Massumi’s keyword “virtual” refers to the flow of affect not (yet or ever) actualized in conscious feeling. And in another essay he declares that “virtuality cannot be seen in the form that emerges from it. The virtual gives form, but itself has none (being the unform of transition). The virtual is imperceptible. It is insensible.”48 Massumi’s dyad of virtual intensity and qualified emotion is not a simple, static opposition but a pairing, subject to “resonation and feedback.”49 Such accounts help clarify various transactions I will describe in this book. As I show in chapter IV, Bernard Mandeville portrays “the Happiness of the City” as virtual and unfelt, inasmuch as the indexes of the City’s prosperity—crowded streets, nasty overflowing gutters—make its inhabitants rather miserable. Yet its thriving condition feeds their own feelings back to them, transformed, to make it possible for them feel a kind of happiness about their success at another level, in another register, after all. Unfelt processes, personal or social, may resonate with our conscious emotions, which may then either heighten or dampen their virtual affective base.

The virtuality of affect has not been much discussed in accounts of sentiment and the passions in eighteenth-century studies. The burgeoning
enterprise of the history and theory of emotions, in scholarship about the period and beyond, has instead focused on the shape and historical transformations of more apparent feelings. Important monographs have explored, for instance, the difference between premodern and modern (i.e., eighteenth-century and beyond) conceptions of happiness in illuminating terms, as well as the special affective power of literary love. The literature of sensibility and sympathy will continue to inspire studies that bear on new theoretical approaches to affect, and new essays and collections on the topic in eighteenth-century studies are appearing all the time. These have understandably zeroed in on and discussed discernible passions, and the expressive power of tears, cries, laughter, and the like. A sustained account of unfelt affect, its potential or virtual elements that differ from the palpable and apparent realizations of emotion with which it resonates, has not appeared until this book.

A central motive of this study, however, pulls it away from some of the most often stated aims of affect theory. My emphasis on the insensible as a ready rhetorical maneuver, used by writers to execute otherwise impossible shifts between depictions of incompatible feelings, stands in tension with what Lawrence Grossberg notes is the stress in theories of affect on its “non-representational and . . . non-semantic” dimensions, or—in Seigworth and Gregg’s terms—its “pre-/extra-/para-linguistic” standing. A similar impulse to draw a line between affect and language helps define Massumi’s project. While insisting that “language, though headstrong, is not simply in opposition to [affective] intensity,” he tends to find affect operating on a fundamentally nonlinguistic plane. Much writing about affect exhibits a similar tendency. The strand pursued by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, leading not from Deleuze but from psychologist Silvan Tomkins, rejects the dogmas of the so-called linguistic turn of the early “theory” era and instead describes a bodily affect expressly irreducible to the binary oppositions of language deconstructed by poststructuralists. In one of the most often cited critiques of affect theory, Ruth Leys has argued that both Massumi and Sedgwick are invested in a dualism that portrays affects in the body as radically distinct from the mind’s “intention and reason,” especially as articulated by language. They thus make what Leys calls “the error of separating the affects from cognition or meaning.”

The peculiar nature of the eighteenth-century idioms I survey in this book mostly sets them apart from the issues at stake in these debates. Accounts of the body and the structures of psychology do figure in many examples here, and a sense of what the body can do, newly vivid in the period, is one context of appeals to the insensible. But eighteenth-century brain science is not a
master key to the idiom across all its uses; nor do I attempt to ground my observations about old literature in current neuroscientific or psychological theories. A humanist such as Massumi turns to the experiments of Benjamin Libet on the will,60 while others take up the popular theories of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio to site the foundations of nonconsciousness in what he calls the “proto-self.”61 Though nonconscious and therefore not “subjective” (on one definition), the distinct processes that the proto-self orchestrates for Damasio can be listed and located in brain and body.62 It is tempting to compare Damasio’s proto-self, “an integrated collection of separate neural patterns that map, moment by moment, the most stable aspects of the organism’s physical structure,”63 to whatever layer of personhood is said by eighteenth-century literature to be affected insensibly.

But the idioms that evoke unfelt affect in the eighteenth century do not point to specific places in the brain or elsewhere in the body in quite the way that Damasio, Gerald Edelman, and other neuroscientists identify the nonconscious bases of feeling now. Even the most concretely sited constituents of the brain discussed in this book, Hartley’s particles in the white matter, are defined as fundamentally elusive, “infinitesimal.” Writers I treat appeal to the insensible in accounts of mind, brain, and body nearly always to designate their unknowable dimensions, their “secret Magick,” their “unaccountable” or “indiscernible” ways (in Trenchard’s words)—a place where inquiry halts and, in principle, can go no further. The affiliation of the insensible with a kind of skepticism will be a theme sounded throughout this book. The examples here from eighteenth-century anatomy and psychology, as well as those from other areas of prose, more evoke the mysterious view of affect’s virtual nature described by Massumi (e.g., “undecidability fed forward into thought”) than his and other theorists’ attempts to ground what they call affect in contemporary neuroscience.64

So the idiom’s status as a rhetorical invocation of what cannot be sensed overrides whatever use it may have to point to specific bodily states or processes. But its adverbial character and function as a mediating term also differentiate it from what scholars usually mean by a “discursive construction” of emotion: taxonomies of the passions, for instance, or specific modes of feeling assigned to gender roles. Again, the insensible commits only to depicting how things happen, not to designating what anything is. Its passing appearances, unlike more assertive and deliberate terms in accounts of emotion, make construction seem like the wrong word for what it does. And its grammatically negative function, setting a change apart from what can be felt, known, willed, or intended, opens its reference up even more. What I have called the idiom’s openness invites rather than arrests interpretation.
This openness does not neutralize the idiom’s cultural uses. I will show throughout this book how it serves particularly charged narratives: the civilization of the passions, the four-stages theory of the Scottish Enlightenment, the disciplining of women’s desires, and (perhaps most markedly ideological of all) Smith’s story of happy socioeconomic outcomes conjured by the invisible hand. The epilogue of this book will remark on affinities between the insensible in the eighteenth century and how ideology works according to accounts from the nineteenth century and beyond, by moving people in ways they do not notice. The unfelt as well as feeling can be recruited to justify sociopolitical arrangements that serve particular interests. But by leaving a place blank or open in narrations of the emotions, the insensible introduces an element of unpredictability in them. In this too, it resembles what some theoretical writers now hope for from affect: a source of transformative possibility.

How Far the Unfelt Goes

The wide spread of significant usage of the idioms treated in this discussion poses a challenge to any attempt to survey them. This book could never be a conventional history, following a single thread from point A to point C. Nor could it resemble scholarship that traces the migration of concepts from one zone to another—the influence, say, of a medical idea on fiction. The insensible is everywhere at once. But the book’s four chapters, on philosophy, fiction, historiography, and political economy, do present their examples in four parallel sequences. Each starts (more or less) around the end of the seventeenth century, moves forward to examples from the heart of the age of sensibility, and then looks ahead—to illustrate the idiom’s origins, flourishing, and decline. These developments as I read them are not as neatly unified as a single Ngram line. Though chapter IV refers to seventeenth-century political economists such as William Petty, its first substantial example is Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*, which began publication in 1714 (1705, if you count *The Grumbling Hive*), and chapter I stops with Eliza Haywood and Adam Smith. (A final philosophical example from William Godwin at the end of the eighteenth century awaits in the epilogue.) What will emerge is a detailed picture of the developing uses to which the idiom was put, with thoughts on why and how it came to be less useful.

The book’s second structural principle motivates my choice and sequence of examples, not only to impose order on them but also to reveal what the idiom’s range really means. The book progresses from small to big. Chapter I
begins by discussing the impulse of the period's philosophy to lay its foundations on the most minute affective components of mental life, exemplified by Locke's attention to the "insensible parts" of matter that cause sensations, and Hartley's infinitesimal particles inside the brain. I then examine Condillac's and Hume's associative accounts of the psychology of the whole person and conclude chapter I with Haywood and Smith, who point the moral sentiments of the individual toward society. Chapter II turns to the novel to understand that form's special zone of interest: the individual character's feelings as manifested in her mind and on her body, and the small social units—families linked by the prospect of her marriage—intensely watchful over these feelings. Chapters III and IV address the power of unfelt affect over still larger social groups. The historiography treated in chapter III uses the idiom to narrate the progress of entire nations or peoples and, at times, suggests how such narratives are subject to question. Chapter IV shows how commerce links the individual to a collectivity not through the passing of time but rather in a cyclical, self-reinforcing system—we now call it "the economy"—driven and steered by "human nature" anchored in human feeling. Schemes of tax policy, for instance, owe their appeal to the systematic, predictable nature of unfelt affect. Yet even here, the insensible also offers to some writers—notably, Smith—a sense of the affective contingency of commerce, as discussed in the last section of the book's final chapter.

This increase of scale allows the book to demonstrate the consistency of the insensible as an idiom across a broad range, from the vanishingly minute to the incomprehensibly vast, such as systems of international commerce whose operations are "impossible not to lose sight of," as Richard Cantillon puts it. The processes called insensible can be both much smaller (for Hartley, infinitely so) and much larger than the individual persons whom they affect. The idiom therefore untethers itself from any particular embodiment. Even examples in the middle of the scale tend to use it to modify processes that affect people from "outside," such as the "four days" with Orville that change how Evelina comes to feel about him. The range of the scale, its reach from sub- to suprapersonal, itself dramatizes the distinctness of unfelt affect from individual subjectivity. My selection of examples, from Locke's Essay at the beginning to Smith's Wealth of Nations at the end, is motivated in part by a desire to demonstrate this range in an ordered sequence: to survey the space that the insensible takes up, as the four historical progressions in its four parallel chapters express its movement through time.

Also influencing my selection is the conviction that the power and interest of the idiom appear most strikingly in readings of "major" texts and authors (supported by concurrent discussions of less well-known ones). Since I aim to
demonstrate the unnoticed but significant help that the insensible lends to the language of feeling in the long eighteenth century, my targets include arguments as well known as Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities, Hume’s account of associative relations, and Smith’s of the invisible hand. The idiom’s role in delineating the Richardson–Fielding opposition, so important in accounts of fiction’s development in the eighteenth century and after, attracts more attention here than occurrences in less famous novelists. Of course, the category of major authors is always evolving, and now includes Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood as well as Jane Austen and John Locke, and writers not widely read in their own time can have a different kind of importance (such as Cantillon, only “rediscovered” as an important economist by William Stanley Jevons late in the nineteenth century).

Another motive of my selection of examples is reflected in the status of many as signal texts of what could broadly be designated a British Enlightenment: the early, English one of Locke and Newton (the latter mostly by way of Hartley, in this discussion), and the later, Scottish one of Hume and Smith. Other writers discussed here, including Gibbon, Haywood, and Mandeville, have been productively treated by scholars as Enlightenment figures. (The extent to which the eighteenth-century English novel can be seen as an Enlightenment enterprise remains an open and intriguing question.) The French works examined throughout are included because their use of insensiblement—especially as amplified, I show, by the proclivities of translator Thomas Nugent—seems to influence English philosophical and historiographical style. Many of these French works, by Condillac, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, also sit in the Enlightenment’s main stream.

This focus on Enlightenment figures across a century and several national contexts runs somewhat against a trend in intellectual history over the last twenty or so years to distinguish ever more local Enlightenments. (So J. G. A. Pocock, for instance, will contrast the Enlightenment of philosophes to one of érudits in France and describe an “Arminian Enlightenment” that Gibbon encountered in Lausanne.) More apt for this study are broader distinctions, such as the one from Jonathan Israel (invoked above) between a moderate, mainstream Enlightenment in Britain and a radical and international Spinozan one. Insofar as the insensible contributes to a recognizably Enlightenment intellectual style, it expresses such moderation, gesturing toward what cannot be felt and therefore to human limits—a restraint set against dogmatic radicalism. As I will show, however, this restraint performs varying functions. It can serve to magically reconcile incompatible elements (such as selfishness and general happiness), but it can also question any such reassuring resolution. Both
impulses, however, match the intellectual moderation broadly seen as characteristic of the Enlightenment in Britain.

The very thing that allows the insensible to roam through all kinds of British writing of the period is what makes a literary study, broadly construed, the appropriate way to approach it. Its status as a portable stylistic device rather than a theme or idea housed in one of the period’s protodisciplines, its life on the surface of prose, as it were, indicates that its meaning can best be tracked as part of the period’s literary style. The idiom acquires its peculiar resonance, moreover, when writers are focused more intently on other things: important transformations, mechanisms of the mind, plot, history, or money. Attentive reading is needed to draw out such resonances in part because usual practice in intellectual history of reading for the main idea has tended to ignore or not much consider them. Still, this device tends to attach itself to and shape an array of ideas—mental association, stadial history, the specie-flow mechanism, and so on—in comparable ways. So while the chapters of this book do not attempt extended histories of such ideas, their close readings draw in the work of intellectual historians more than a literary study usually would. The book ranges across so many areas of prose usually discussed separately in eighteenth-century studies because the essence of the idiom’s meaning resides in its surprisingly general usefulness.

As I proceed through this study, I keep coming back to occurrences of the word insensibly. But there are whole sections without this fixation. My pages on Hartley in chapter I explore what he means by “infinitesimal medullary particles,” and in chapter IV, I discuss Mandeville’s descriptions of a happiness that people do not exactly feel without stressing the word. I examine Smith’s phrase “secretly conscious” and treat occurrences of others such as “by imperceptible degrees.” Still, the value of a consistent focus on a single semantically rich term has become increasingly clear to me. Such a focus orders my examples and discovers concrete, common ground for comparisons and contrasts in my interpretations of them. It has always been important to me as a literary scholar to approach usage as it actually is, instantiated in actual words, phrases, and sentences, instead of devising general, abstract categories and fitting a range of examples into them. But as will be apparent, my purpose is not to isolate stray moments of usage but rather to show how the term helps create the larger significance of a theory, a fictional story, and so on. My analyses do not stop at the term but use it as a clue to more expansive meanings.

The emphasis here is literary also in the sense that what it examines happens on the page, in a stylistics of affect. The idiom’s negative, gestural character could find expression really nowhere else. This raises a question about its
status within the larger phenomenon of sensibility, which has been treated in literary and other scholarship not just as a language but also as a “culture.” Is there also a culture of what is not felt? It is comparatively easy to view the insensible functioning culturally in its strictly privative, inherent sense, and illuminating studies have (for instance) discussed women’s “spells,” fainting, and other forms of lost or missing feeling as performed cultural practices. The insensible in its additive, noninherent sense, however, resists being considered a practice such as this because it cannot be sensed while it is happening at all, by anybody subject to or near it. Only retrospectively, at a certain distance, can writers refer to what has occurred insensibly. Yet as we will see, the movements of insensibly unfolding processes for many writers of the period constitute the very condition of society or “culture.” People feel their desires, obligations, and needs, but these cohere, by an unfelt movement, into cultural forms larger than the sum of them. So if the insensible in one sense cannot by its very nature materialize as a discernible cultural or material practice, it serves writers in the period as a tool to describe the manner in which culture comes into being.

This introduction began by noting the poetic quality of the idiom that first attracted me to it. But the long discursive poems of eighteenth-century literature pertaining to consciousness, with their own sense of expansive scale—Edward Young’s The Complaint: or Night Thoughts, and James Thomson’s The Seasons—do not make much use of such terms. The great poet of the insensible, I think, is William Wordsworth. His fascination with figures who move along the border of feeling and unfeeling—his “solitaries,” the Blind Beggar, the Leech-Gatherer, the Discharged Soldier—leads him to depict unfeeling as a peculiarly active state. An inaugural instance occurs in “Old Man Travelling: Animal Tranquillity and Decay,” still technically an eighteenth-century poem, included in the first edition of Lyrical Ballads (1798):

He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought—He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need.
Here Wordsworth pushes the term’s two semantic poles, “in an unfeeling way” and “in an unfelt way,” so hard as to nearly collapse their difference. The old man is subdued “insensibly” in an ever-extending, exactingly slow process, so gradually as not to be noticed (not by himself, not by “the little hedgerow birds” in line 1). And he is subdued to a state of near total insensibility. The convergence of the unfelt, ongoing process and the terminally unfeeling state somehow produces his extraordinary, effortless movement through the landscape. A double unfeeling permits what Wordsworth means by moving with thought.

This combination, in its strange Wordworthian manner, creates the enviable condition of the old man, beyond enlightened patience, a condition that he himself “hardly feels” (line 14). The powerful evocation of such processes in *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Prelude*, and other poems again indicates that graphs of usage fail to capture the capacity of the idiom to generate new profundity after its influence seems to taper off. Wordsworth’s figures who move insensibly are heirs to those who move likewise through European history in Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, and through the marriage plots of eighteenth-century novels as virtuous heroines inculpably succumb to desire. In this way, too, the emergence of feeling from unfeeling in all the eighteenth-century minds and bodies discussed in this book anticipates further profound functions of affect in literature’s future.