David Hartley, and John Locke before him, start with the insensibly small in their accounts of sensation and experience. They then construct a larger entity, the self, held together by the insensible through another medium, time, instead of (in Hartley’s case, infinitely) small space. This more expansive, temporal significance of the idiom of the insensible will be most relevant to the midcentury philosophy of sentiment surveyed in the remainder of chapter I, and beyond, as subsequent chapters of this book treat novels, histories, and works of political economy that use the unfelt to build ever larger sociotemporal structures. The midcentury philosophers of consciousness to whom I now turn tease out the subtle ways in which unnoticed mental movements structure associative links. Such movements again do not deserve the label “unconscious feelings” or “insensible perceptions.” They are instead patterned passages of nonfeeling that do their work in the mind, so to say, as nonfeelings, emptiness, missing parts. Pioneers of the theory of association such as Étienne Bonnot de Condillac and David Hume do not propose, like Hartley, an obscure anatomy of the brain, beyond the frontiers of our sensory powers, to support their accounts. They turn away from neurophysiology to provide experiential depictions of the empty spaces holding consciousness together. The Lockean view of consciousness, “interrupted always,” and Hartley’s account of oscillations between voluntary and automatic activity become in these other
hands a psychology of attention and unawareness, of vivacity emerging from the insensible.

The Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (1746, Eng. trans. 1756), the first major philosophical work by Condillac, explores not only the connections but also the holes that association makes in conscious life. This Essay pertains to a discussion of the British tradition because of the closeness it keeps to Locke’s (its subtitle advertises it as Being a supplement to Mr. Locke’s Essay on the Human Understanding), and because it entered English relatively early, in 1756 (unlike Condillac’s more substantial Traité des Sensations, 1754, which was not translated in the eighteenth century). But it is also interesting because its translator, Thomas Nugent, liked the term insensibly and used it more than Condillac’s original warrants (though Condillac himself was fond enough of insensiblement). We will meet Nugent again later in this book, where this predilection turns up in translations of Montesquieu and Voltaire.

Condillac begins by turning away from the search for the physical bases of the mental, firmly asserting dualism as he concludes that “the body, therefore, as an assemblage and aggregate, cannot be the subject of thought,” and questioning Locke’s speculation that matter might be endowed with the capacity to think (16–17). Without being very interested in physiology, then, Condillac elaborates a theory of attention and, more important for this discussion, of inattention in the service of an associationist psychology. But despite his misgivings about Locke’s openness to materialism, Condillac—like Hartley—names Locke as a primary influence in respect to consciousness and the power of associative relations. And also like Hartley, he puts special emphasis on the role of language in occasioning and cementing associations. (There is no evidence that either philosopher’s work influenced the other’s.) Condillac throws in with Locke’s view that “the soul has no perceptions of which it does not take notice” and criticizes Cartesian accounts which “have admitted perceptions of which the mind never takes any notice” (28). Like Locke, Condillac comes to what may seem a surprising view: though there are no unnoticed perceptions, our consciousness is filled with unnoticings.

Condillac’s account comes alive with narrative examples, and he resolves this puzzle with a story about being at a “public entertainment.” He remarks that “among several perceptions of which we have a consciousness at the same time, it frequently happens that we are more conscious of one than the other” (28). Here the insensible performs its mediating function between degrees of awareness:

Let a person be at a public entertainment, where a variety of objects seem to dispute his attention, his mind will be attacked by a number of
perceptions, of which it certainly takes notice; but insensibly some of these will be more agreeable and engaging to him than others, and of course he will more willingly give way to them. As soon as that happens, he will begin to be less affected by the others, his consciousness of them will even insensibly diminish, insomuch that upon his coming to himself he shall not remember to have taken any notice of them. (29)

Condillac relies on the word *insensiblement* throughout his *Essay*, though the first of the two instances here is “peu à peu,” changed to “insensibly” by his translator Nugent. Neither term in this passage gestures to anything like the subliminal or unconscious. It is crucial for Condillac to insist, like Locke before him, that the person here, insofar as he is affected by anything, is consciously affected. There is no Leibnizian unperceived perception, no lower-level mental registering of what the conscious mind does not notice. Locke’s view of consciousness as “interrupted always” had focused on our tendency to attend to the present moment and lose sight of the past. Condillac presents a more dynamic and uneven picture of present consciousness, which always prioritizes among the things affecting it and as it does, ceaselessly forgets as it notices and notices as it forgets.

Our present is woven together with this hectic forgetting and micro-neglect. In illuminating remarks on Condillac’s *Essay*, Suzanne Gearhart argues that his treatment of inattention undermines his Lockean rejection of unperceived perception. She cites a passage immediately following the one quoted above, about the experience of a spectator in a theater, who finds himself more absorbed in the performance because he takes cues from the absorption of those around him. Gearhart concludes, “Our attention for the stage may even be a result of our emulation of the other, attentive spectators . . . in an ‘attentive’ audience, all the spectators in fact must be at once attentive to and forgetful of the other spectators. Condillac has rejected the notion of an unperceived perception only to create the notion of an inattentive attention.” While Gearhart is right to argue that such gaps must complicate any commitment to the unity of consciousness, I think the phrase “at once” misrepresents attention’s successive, temporal nature. According to Condillac’s model, we attend to the other spectators but then forget them so fast that our minds produce the “deception” (the French original has *l’illusion*) that the stage holds our undivided attention (29). Condillac indeed insists that our minds perpetually “give way” to one object after another.

He acknowledges that “there are some moments in which our consciousness does not seem [*ne paroit pas*] to be divided between the action represented, and the rest of the entertainment; by which I mean, the theatre, the audience,
the actors, &c” (29). But by asserting that consciousness does not seem to be divided, Condillac is, of course, continuing to insist that it is. Our insensibly shifting attention allows this illusion to occur. The example of the theatrical spectator hence cannot be Condillac’s attempt to preserve “the unity of the perceiving subject.” He will subsequently note that “there are perceptions in our mind, which we do not remember, not even the very moment after their impression” (31). The point is not that they abide unperceived but that they are perceived and then instantly gone. The gaps in our consciousness are essentially temporal, holes in the flow of awareness created by the often extremely minute span of time it takes to forget what does not matter to us. There can be no “inattentive attention,” only attention and inattention forever replacing each other. And the term insensibly makes all the difference because it signifies an unfelt movement instead of the simultaneous copresence of a conscious and an unconscious perception.

The term refers, moreover, not to what is itself forgotten, the stimuli out there in the world that slip away from us, but to our lack of awareness that we notice and forget this quickly and fluidly. Nugent’s rendering of the first instance, “insensibly some of these will be more agreeable and engaging,” refers to the noticing, while the second, “his consciousness of them will insensibly even diminish,” the forgetting. Hence the term insensibly gestures to a kind of lubricant in consciousness that allows us to single one thing out as we allow others to recede. Condillac enhances this effect of the mind sliding along without awareness of its attention and inattention by the passivity prominent in passage. The mind is “attacked” by perceptions, and the person will “give way” to them. Though the person’s consciousness takes everything in, its retention and loss of perceptions are not at his command. He not only notices and forgets insensibly. His awareness itself insensibly resists his control. Thus Condillac identifies another way in which consciousness is a lossy phenomenon whose texture and shape are created by the gaps that fill it up, like air bubbles in bread.

As Condillac’s Essay continues, it becomes apparent that the insensible as deployed in his theory of inattention lies at the heart of the association of ideas itself. He remarks on the power of physiognomic reflections over our thoughts: “In general the impressions we feel under different circumstances, induce us to connect ideas, which we have it no longer in our power to separate. We cannot, for instance, frequent company, without insensibly connecting the ideas of a certain turn of mind and character with a particular figure and make” (82). Here again the milieu is social interaction and “company,” in which a variety of stimuli shapes both our awareness and our unawareness of our mind’s actions. The self’s passivity earlier remarked in his account of inattention
here reappears as inherent in associations. We are induced to make them and have no power to separate them once they are made. That we do so insensibly is a crucial aspect of their power.

The constitutive role played by the insensible only becomes more pronounced in more sophisticated activity of the associating mind. For Condillac, the acquisition of associations in language and the greater awareness of our world also emerge from unnoticed processes. Cries of passion gradually form into a system of signs in our minds: “The same circumstances could not be frequently repeated, but [the first learners of language] must have accustomed themselves at length to connect with the cries of the passions and with the different motions of the body, those perceptions which were expressed in so sensible a manner” (173). The vivid, “sensible” character of natural bodily expression strikes us and only afterward becomes customary: language learners “began to acquire some sort of habit, they were able to command their imagination as they pleased, and insensibly they learned to do by reflexion what they had hitherto done merely by instinct” (173).

Oddly, “reflexion” seems to operate more insensibly than instinct does. We gain through signs a fuller awareness of meaning, but a loss of intimacy with the process of sophistication that accompanies this acquisition: “The use of those signs insensibly enlarged and improved the operations of the mind, and on the other hand these having acquired such improvement, perfected the signs, and rendered the use of them more familiar” (173–74). It begins to seem that Condillac’s use of the idiom of the insensible is itself a kind of reflex, used to describe any gradual process, even the heightening of our capacities to consciously reflect. The persistence of the device is not meaningless, however. It testifies to Condillac’s abiding sense of the mind’s “operations,” in which noticing and forgetting, consciously improving and habitually associating, go hand in hand. Finally, the insensible has become a feature not only of our neglect of what is going on outside and inside of our minds but of our coming to the highest levels of consciousness.

David Hume’s own theory of the association of ideas also depends on the quiet collaboration of vivid feeling with the insensible. This affective complexity forms the foundation of his project, his account of our belief in associative relations in book 1 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738–40). This is well before his taxonomy of the passions in book 2 or his account of sympathy in book 3, to which contemporary discussions of affect in Hume more frequently turn. Hume considered his theory of association to be his prime achievement in the *Treatise*. As he puts it in *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), “If any thing can intitle the author to so
glorious a name as that of an inventor, 'tis the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy.” And association could not occur without affect. An association, according to James A. Harris, represents for Hume “a change in how the idea feels to the mind.” And as we might expect, Gilles Deleuze’s book about Hume, Empiricism and Subjectivity (1953, his first, based on his dissertation), finds “affectivity” at the heart of Hume’s doctrine of association. On the one hand, belief in particular associations—say, of causes to effects—is a vivacity of feeling, as again the Abstract has it: “the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit.”

Yet the experience of a liveliness of sentiment that drives association also requires an unnoticed movement: not a hidden impression or idea, nor any “unconscious” content, but an unregistered mental passage. As Hume notes in book 1 of the Treatise, the communication of “force and vivacity” that associates one idea to another is itself unfelt:

When the mind fixes constantly on the same object, or passes easily and insensibly along related objects, the disposition [of the mind when it performs its operations] has a much longer duration. Hence it happens, that when the mind is once inliven’d by a present impression, it proceeds to form a more lively idea of the related objects, by a natural transition of the disposition from the one to the other. The change of the objects is so easy, that the mind is scarce sensible of it, but applies itself to the conception of the related idea with all the force and vivacity it acquir’d from the present impression.

This “change of objects” is the central action of association. Its essence is movement. The very vivacity that associates objects in the mind has an underside of unfeeling on which the association also depends. If the force were not vivid, it could not associate, but if its action were itself felt, objects in the mind would remain merely distinct. Some eight years later, in the Philosophical Es-
says concerning Human Understanding (1748), Hume’s emphasis on association had somewhat receded. But the insensible likewise figures in his summary definition of it: “Nature has establish’d Connexions among particular Ideas,” he remarks, and “no sooner one occurs to our Thoughts than it introduces its correlative, and carries our Attention towards it, by a gentle and insensible Movement.” Though Hume more openly insists on the “intense and steady” character of “the Sentiment of Belief” (84), its insensible component, the movement, is what makes this intensity possible.

The sentiment of belief in general depends on both vivacity and a version of the unfelt affect described throughout this book. Hume founds this dual
sentiment on “Custom” (what the Philosophical Essays call “the great Guide of human Life,” 75), which itself may suggest unthinking, automatic patterns of mental action. Yet it is not easy to pinpoint exactly what is insensible in customary associations, which themselves are not unnoticed at all. Our minds vividly associate a portrait with its subject, a room with another adjacent to it, or a wound with pain (Philosophical Essays, 32–33). Nor does the insensible lie in any tendency to consider our beliefs to be rational when they in fact arise from sentiment. We certainly often make such a mistake unawares, but Hume does not refer to that when he mentions the “gentle and insensible Movement” of association.

Rather, the insensible characterizes the very facility with which associative movements occur. Like Condillac, who designated as insensible not the impressions that we instantaneously forget as we move through a room but rather our not noticing that we accumulate impressions by forgetting other ones, Hume does not describe insensible mental ideas. Instead the insensible is again a kind of lubricant of mentation, referring neither to thought’s objects nor to the mental mechanism itself. In her treatment of association in the Treatise, Annette Baier has asked, “Could the associative relations between thoughts be . . . covert, unconscious relations between unrecognized relata?” She concludes, “So the association of ideas that explains our complex ideas of lasting ‘substances’ may well have to be taken to be often unconscious.” This insight can be refined by insisting that “unconscious relations” do not equal something that is itself an (unconscious) idea, with some kind of tacit content. That is, my association between a wound and pain does not consist of some unconscious proposition, hidden in my mind, like “wounds of that kind hurt.” As Baier points out, very often the content of associations is explicit, as when someone exclaims “Ouch!” upon seeing another’s injury, or “That boy really looks like his father!” Baier’s word “often” above indicates that such content is sometimes recognized and sometimes not.

The kind of nonconsciousness that Hume gets at with the “gentle and insensible Movement” instead functions consistently as insensible, or something we are “scarce sensible” of. It is not some idea or proposition that we do not think, but rather the movement itself, which we do not feel. This is always insensible, or nearly so, while the question of whether or not we assign some propositional content to an association—this cloak makes me proud because it resembles beautiful cloaks I have seen and because I own it—simply depends on whether or not we spell out such thoughts to ourselves. The “unconscious” component of the association of ideas for Hume is not, then, some unthought proposition—X typically relates to Y—but the unfelt slide itself. As he puts it in the Treatise, “The passage betwixt related ideas is, therefore, so smooth and
easy, that it produces little alteration on the mind, and seems like the continuation of the same action; and as the continuation of the same action is an effect of the continu’d view of the same object, ’tis for this reason we attribute sameness to every succession of related objects. The thought slides along the succession with equal facility, as if it consider’d only one object; and therefore confounds the succession with the identity” (356). Succession confounded with identity: Hume brings us back to the perspective of Locke on the seeming self-identity of the oak tree and its “insensibly succeeding Parts.” Vividness itself for Hume depends on this gentle, sliding, nonvivid movement. The fire so vividly evokes heat, the son so strikingly recalls the father he takes after because the mind moves insensibly to link them. In this way, then, the insensible makes our sentiments of belief what they are.

Hume characteristically recognizes the rhythm and progress of his own sophisticated philosophical pursuits in these basic movements of consciousness. His working of the insensible into the sentiments of belief on important occasions comes to characterize the formation of his belief in his own philosophical insights. In the Treatise, he dramatizes his recognition of the true basis of the association of causes to effects as something of a surprise: “Thus in advancing we have insensibly discover’d a new relation betwixt cause and effect, when we least expected it, and were entirely employ’d upon another subject. This relation is their constant conjunction. Contiguity and succession are not sufficient to make us pronounce any two objects to be cause and effect, unless we perceive, that these two relations are preserv’d in several instances” (156–57). This surprising effect arises in part from Hume’s uncertain shifts between the authorial we and the we that includes all human beings who learn from experience. In the preceding paragraph, remembering and learning to expect previous conjunctions lead us to an understanding of cause and effect. Here Hume the philosopher recognizes the relation’s theoretical relevance. This dramatization of the sophisticated intelligence recognizing its own subjection to insensible processes will find an echo in a passage that will be discussed in chapter III, by one of Hume’s heirs, in The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, where Edward Gibbon finds his critical powers as a historian insensibly emerging from his reflection on his sources. In Hume the “advancing” of both philosopher and ordinary person by means of experience produces parallel discoveries: for the person a sense of cause and effect, and for the philosopher a theory of it. The crucial work performed by insensibly in both cases derives from its arising from the movement of experience. In both, the accumulation of associations, not “reason,” creates the sense of relation. The insensible resides within this movement or consolidation of what finally produce vivid expectations and perceptions.
Finally, the insensible helps indicate something of the complexity, if not tension, in Hume’s grand reconciliation of theoretical exploration and common life, a durable theme in Humean exegesis. Taking on the persona of “The Sceptic” in the essay of that title, he concludes, “Here then is the chief triumph of art and philosophy: It insensibly refines the temper, and it points out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain, by a constant bent of mind, and by repeated habit. Beyond this I cannot acknowledge it to have great influence; and I must entertain doubts concerning all those exhortations and consolations, which are in such vogue among speculative reasoners.” The insensible in such cases again plays its crucial mediating role. Art and philosophy both inculcate salubrious habits and “point out” dispositions of mind to be deliberately chosen. Presumably we choose to take up art and philosophy for our own good, yet their benefit accrues insensibly, not because of whatever “exhortations and consolations” they issue. Only after we have already gained the benefit are we enabled to perform the crucial Humean move of choosing our habits and embracing our “bent.” The insensible, then, forms not only our unthinking good habits but also our capacity to endeavor to live well without relying on windy platitudes of moral philosophers. It can function this way only by not being a content or moral proposition (e.g., “thou shalt live according to refined habits”). It must instead be a process. The insensible hence helps Hume reconcile habit and philosophy.