Unfelt

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Unfelt: The Language of Affect in the British Enlightenment. 

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The classic texts of Scottish Enlightenment history reflect and at times contest the thinking about temporal processes found in the great midcentury French efforts to discern history’s deep causes from a magisterial perspective. The mode of Montesquieu helped bring notions especially associated with Scottish attempts to master history into being. He was, for instance, an inspiration (with Lord Kames) for John Dalrymple’s Essay towards a General History of Feudal Property in Great Britain (1757), “the first publication in the English language to make use of the four stages theory” (as James Moore puts it)\(^3\): the contention that human history normally unfolds according to the succession of four dominant modes of subsistence and production—hunter-gatherer, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial—with different political, social, and cultural systems appropriated to each. The turn from neoclassical emphases on great leaders and statecraft to the consideration of more diffuse, structural conditions and change helped give Scottish historiography its “philosophical” flavor.\(^4\) The stages, like moeurs, determine not only the form of social and political life, but also how people whom they affect are able to feel.

Voltaire’s formidable historical works were also always seen as a relevant context in which to assess Scottish historiography, and particularly David Hume’s History of England (1754–62). As Hume acknowledges in a letter to Abbé Jean Bernard le Blanc, “In this Countrey, they call me his Pupil, and think
that my History is an Imitation of his Siecle de Louis XIV,” though he adds
that he had composed the first volumes of his History before Voltaire’s work
had appeared (1751). And while Voltaire’s Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des na-
tions was published as Hume’s full History of England was nearing completion,
Hume requested a copy of it from Gilbert Elliot in 1760, remarking that Vol-
taire’s “general Views are sometimes sound, & always entertaining” (but add-
ing that he is untrustworthy with regard to facts). Hume saw Voltaire’s
eminence as the historian of “general Views” as something to be acknowledged
and perhaps emulated.

The description in Hume’s History of historical processes as insensible, while
nowhere near as frequent as Gibbon’s use of the term twenty years later in
The Decline and Fall, helps him depict the large-scale changes in British atti-
tudes toward liberty, politics, and law that give his work its political bite. In
Hume’s account, the unfelt plays its quiet but significant role in determining
how the “minds of men” collectively undergo gradual changes (and mostly,
for him, improvement) of sensibility. Mark Salber Phillips has noted that Hume
lacks anything quite like the nineteenth-century notion of “public opinion,”
to attribute historical agency to masses of people without identifying a precise,
directive source or power. The Humean appeal to processes beyond notice
suggests something comparable yet distinct. Human consciousness enters
history for him not by being materially located in a “public” but instead more
secretly and inexpressively as an obscure, collective sentiment.

And without reference to the intentional character of public opinion by
which a public “wants” or “decides,” the idiom of the insensible supports the
political program of the History, which delights in pointing out how good out-
comes arise despite the intentions of politicians. An unfelt affect better se-
cures political advances than scheming or patriotic ardor. British liberties do
not have their basis, according to Hume, in a long-cherished and passionately
defended ancient constitution (a view promoted in anticourt polemics like
those published in Viscount Bolingbroke’s Craftsman) but rather arise from
slowly evolving social, legal, and commercial conditions starting around the
reign of Henry VII—conditions that make a formalization of British liberty
in 1688 possible. Participants in this evolution mostly do not intend such an
outcome, and Hume often savors the historical ironies that arise from dispari-
ties between immediate purposes and long-term results.

The historical meaning of the insensible in Hume is more focused, how-
ever, than the general idea of unintended consequences much discussed in
scholarship treating British and particularly Scottish thought in the period.
The idiom in the histories of Hume and other Scots tends to portray specifi-
cally the emergence of new feeling and capacities to feel. The sensibility of
the social collective refines, develops, and effervesces until British society and the individuals it comprises have sensibly changed. Such a depiction of history’s affective development solves a particular problem for Hume. It allows him to maintain his view of passion as humanity’s prime motivator while preserving his sense that British constitutional freedoms evolved without much influence, as he remarks, “from any fixed passion towards civil liberty.”

Chapter IV of this book describes a different pattern, which distinguishes the idiom’s function in political economy from that in the writing of Enlightenment history. Both occupy the most vast end of the scale of insensible affects that I have surveyed. But in writing about commerce, the idiom expresses a repeating cycle. Rather disreputable passions—greed, envy, vanity, and others associated with “private vices”—remain consistent and unchanging but are also the very things that eventually produce what Adam Smith and Bernard Mandeville before him call “public happiness.” As we shall see, that public feeling is unfelt in some profound sense by those whose private feelings produce and maintain it. The unintended consequences celebrated in political economy result from constant passions, grounded in “human nature,” while the insensible in Scottish historiography points to transformations in human feeling itself. The former is cyclical, the latter linear.

Early in the history of publication of Hume’s work, in the first of the Stuart volumes (volume 1 of what he then called *The History of Great Britain*, 1754), he narrates one such crucial alteration in human sentiments. This is also a large statement that introduces his conception of what we might now call the force of enlightenment in history. Beyond merely effecting a recovery or renaissance of ancient learning by men of letters, this force triumphs by exceeding the confines of a few inspired, distinguished minds. At the turn of the seventeenth century, a generalized, unfelt, but orderly alteration of sensibility brings forth the new epoch:

About this period, the minds of men, throughout Europe, especially in England, seem to have undergone a general, but insensible revolution. Though letters had been revived in the preceding age, they were chiefly cultivated by those sedentary professions; nor had they, till now, begun to spread themselves, in any degree, among men of the world. Arts, both mechanical and liberal, were every day receiving great improvements. Navigation had extended itself over the whole globe. Travelling was secure and agreeable. And the general system of politics, in Europe, was become more enlarged and comprehensive.

Viewing change as insensible again tends to increase its power by obviating the intentions of those it affects. The passage’s style, its odd tenses and distribution
of agency, attenuates the power of “minds of men” to direct or even recognize the revolution they promote. The minds do not simply undergo the change during a particular period but “seem to have undergone” it already by the time it may be noticed by historical narrative. Passives fill the passage, and the series of abstract entities (letters, arts, navigation, traveling, the general system of politics) either perform or receive the effects of the revolution without much indication of conscious direction or even awareness of the change by individuals. Though minds change, they do so “in general,” not as the result of being “cultivated” deliberately by a few.

It is not difficult, moreover, to hear a note of sympathetic identification in Hume’s account. His own career represents an extension of the revolution begun in the early seventeenth century. He has played his own part in such a process by abandoning the abstruse, dense argumentation of the *Treatise of Human Nature* for the more elegant, polished style of his successive volumes of essays and the *History* itself—a miniature reenactment of learning’s expansion from the “sedentary professions” to “men of the world” in the seventeenth century. Of course, Hume made such choices deliberately, and he also consciously strives in the *History of England* to rise above the forces of history by transcending the partisanship of previous historians. Yet he also both theoretically and practically embraces the idea that individual literary talent, including his own, emerges from antecedent, collective circumstances—as when he declares in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” that individuals’ “spirit and genius must be antecedently diffused throughout the people among whom they arise, in order to produce, form, and cultivate, from their earliest infancy, the taste and judgment of those eminent writers”; and when he celebrates the flourishing of Scottish genius, not just his own, in his time. The picture of multifarious forces insensibly creating conditions under which literary talent may arise is one in which he assuredly placed and recognized himself.

These conditions, moreover, are ones of heightened and refined sentiment: in short, “spirit.” Hume continues,

In consequence of this universal fermentation, the ideas of men enlarged themselves on all sides; and the several constituent parts of the gothic governments, which seem to have lain long unactive, began, every where, to operate and encroach on each other. On the continent, where the necessity of discipline had begotten standing armies, the princes commonly established an unlimited authority, and overpowered, by force or intrigue, the liberties of the people. In England, the love of freedom, which, unless checked, flourishes extremely in all liberal natures, acquired
new force, and was regulated by more enlarged views, suitably to that cultivated understanding, which became, every day, more common, among men of birth and education. (5:18)

The “universal fermentation” carries a specific metaphorical weight in Hume: it is a process affecting organic matter, at once a physical, metabolic action and an excitement of the passions. (Hume had used the figure of fermentation to describe cultural liveliness in an essay published two years before, “Of Luxury,” in which he noted that achievement in the mechanical arts correlates to that in the liberal arts.) This conjunction of physical and passionate agitation governs the rhetoric of the passage, in which ideas are “enlarged,” the constituents of governments “operate and encroach,” and the love of freedom “acquire[s] new force” like a spherical body rolling down a slope.

As in the philosophical discussions treated in chapter I, then, Hume here passes from a quasi-physical force to a mental or psychological one by means of the insensible. The transaction partakes of both unfeeling and feeling as a way to transform one into the other. And the sensitivity that grows out of the insensible is something like liveliness itself. Hume notes that one advantage that men of the world have, after all, over those in sedentary professions is their superior capacity to feel and disseminate feeling: “A familiar acquaintance with the precious remains of antiquity excited in every generous breast a passion for a limited constitution, and begat an emulation of those manly virtues, which the Greek and Roman authors, by such animating examples, as well as pathetic expressions, recommend to us” (5:18–19). Hume’s characteristic appreciation of the power of strong feeling (with its attendant dangers, as we will find in the volume’s subsequent accounts of James I’s and Charles I’s fortunes) takes over the passage, which had first dwelled on passives and obscure forces. (The metaphors turn organic at a higher level than fermentation, too, as the acquaintance with ancient sources “begat” emulation.) Now the enthusiastic reading of “animating examples” from the past projects socially transforming sentiments into the present.

A similar account of epochal but unplanned and nonlocalized change comes at the beginning of the Tudor volumes, in his summing up of the reign of Henry VII: “Thus a general revolution was made in human affairs throughout this part of the world; and men attained that situation with regard to commerce, arts, sciences, government, police, and cultivation, in which they have ever since persevered.” Again, change comes as a matter of refined sensibility, not deliberate policy, and attains social substantiality not so much by positive law as by manners, for Hume as for his French counterparts. That term plays, of course, a prominent role throughout The History of England, both in
the main text and in the appendixes of each volume that treat, as he puts it in the James I volume, “government, manners, finances, arms, trade, learning.” In the third appendix of the second Tudor volume, he will remark, “the manners of the age were a general cause, which operated during this whole period” (4:519). In this case, manners help reduce the barons’ and enhance the crown’s power. Hume also uses manners to sound a historical note in his philosophical essays, as in “Of the Standard of Taste,” when he acknowledges how “the particular manners and opinions of our age and country” must affect even our most evenhanded judgments.

A glimpse into the background of Hume’s thinking about manners is offered in his correspondence of the 1730s, at the very start of his literary career, to his friend Michael Ramsay. Hume was already thinking about history; in an undated letter to Ramsay from that period, he had requested a loan of “the Carrier Pelisson’s History, & the last volume of Rapin.” A 1734 letter, posted from Rheims where he spent his French sojourn and undertook a course of study leading to his composition of the Treatise of Human Nature, offers the young Hume’s insight not just into French manners but also into how manners in general work:

After all it must be confess, that the little Niceties of the French Behaviour, tho’ troublesome & impertinent, yet serve to polish the ordinary Kind of People & prevent Rudeness & Brutality. For in the same manner, as Soldiers are found to become more courageous in learning to hold their Musquets within half an Inch of a place appointed; & your Devotees feel their Devotion encrease by the Observance of trivial Superstitions, as Sprinkling, Kneeling, Crossing &c, so men insensibly soften towards each other in the Practice of these Ceremonies. The Mind pleases itself by the Progress it makes in such Trifles, & while it is so supported makes an easy Transition to something more material: And I verily believe, that tis for this reason you scarce ever meet with a Clown, or an ill bred man in France.

The entirely physical nature of the behavioral “Trifles” provides the best way to initiate mental and sentimental improvement in individuals. The placement of the musket “within half an Inch” of an appointed spot, the “Sprinkling, Kneeling, Crossing” that constitute religious observance begin as trivial fixations as “the Mind pleases itself” in mastering them, but they come to produce an “easy transition” to more significant feelings of courage or devotion. When it comes to politeness, such practices “insensibly soften” the social collective—in part, it seems, because of their origination in unmeaning bodily behavior. Hume thus notes early on the vital role played by the insensible in
both constituting a nation’s moeurs and improving individuals’ sentiments. And again, it is not hard to recognize Hume’s amused implication of himself in such acculturation, as he finds himself polished insensibly through his experience of French society.

The decisive role of the dyad of feeling and unfeeling in Hume’s historical enterprise emerges by way of contrast to one of his work’s main competitors, Catharine Macaulay’s republican, eight-volume *History of England from the Ascension of James I to that of the Brunswick Line* (later changed to *from the Ascension of James I to the Revolution*), some twenty years in the making (1763–83). Like other British historians after midcentury, Macaulay turns her attention to the role of moeurs in history, and especially their support of the English embrace of liberty and virtue in the seventeenth century, as when she remarks in volume 1 that “the revival of letters co-operated” with the shining example of the Dutch “to effect an alteration in the modes of thinking of the English nation.” 57 She is also alert to the rise of seventeenth-century parliamentary power as an unintended consequence of a long history of royal scheming, including “the crafty policy of the First Henry of the Tudor line.” 58 These features mark Macaulay’s *History* as an Enlightenment project, in these respects reflecting the historiographical spirit of her time.

But her work differs from Hume’s in its tendency to de-emphasize affect as a primary engine of history. As Karen O’Brien has stressed, Macaulay promotes an “ideal of individual rationality, responsibility and patriotism.” 59 As such an emphasis leaves little place for recognizing the historical efficacy of mass feeling, it does likewise for mass unfeeling. The idea of an “insensible revolution” could not appeal to Macaulay’s sense of active republican virtue. Whatever sparse appearances of such idioms there are in her work tend to mark a falling away from liberty rather than a secret support of it. 60 In contrast to “almost insensible” historical factors underscored by other historians to depict political and social advancement, she employs an entirely different rhetoric of temporality—noting, for instance, that “the Commons almost suddenly roused to a spirit of free enquiry and high independence, and opposed, with unremitting ardor, that civil and ecclesiastical power to which they had hitherto paid an almost-implicit obedience.” 61 As reason instead of affect determines historical progress for Macaulay, the slowness of the almost insensible gives way to an “almost suddenly roused” neo-Roman republican virtue.

A body of work more aligned with Hume’s sentimental history is that of William Robertson, including *The History of Scotland* (1759), *The History of the Reign of Emperor Charles V* (1769), and *The History of America* (1777). These express his largest ambitions in historical explanation by identifying processes not noticed by historical agents, yet intimately linked to sentiment. His View
of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century, the first volume of The History of the Reign of Emperor Charles V, even more amply than Hume attests to a devotion to the idea of sentimental progress, ultimately reliant on the unfelt, while acknowledging both Hume’s influence and Montesquieu’s. Robertson praises the latter in typical terms as one who sees deep into hidden causes, singling out his “industry in tracing all the circumstances of ancient and obscure institutions, and sagacity in penetrating into the causes and principles which contributed to establish them.” 62 A similar aliveness to the interaction between deep causes and the otherwise obscure or insignificant events and circumstances that express them animates Robertson’s work as a historian.

Something like that interaction appears in an anecdote in his first major work, The History of Scotland, a text not usually seen as a work of true conjectural history (unlike his View of the Progress of Society in Europe). An attention to Scottish manners helps Robertson explain what would otherwise seem an event touched off by the vagaries of passion. The glue attaching accident to the historically meaningful is, again, manners. During the so-called War of the Rough Wooing, he remarks that the Scots, “naturally an irascible and high-spirited people . . . seconded the French in their military operations with the utmost coldness, and this secret disgust grew insensibly to a degree of indignation that could hardly be restrained; and on occasion of a very slight accident, broke out with fatal violence”—a quarrel between a French soldier and “a citizen of Edinburgh.” 63 In this story it is not exactly Scottish manners—their irascibility and high spirits—that are unnoticed. Nor, of course, are the events in it hidden from view, the “very slight accident” and the subsequently “fatal violence.” What is insensible is the way in which Scottish moeurs work beneath the surface, finally translating into a historical incident, which to superficial observers might seem merely accidental or random. Episodes like this demonstrate how terms like insensible allow historians to weave nonserial into serial modes of explanation: a description of what Scots are like allows a narration of events. Here the “secret disgust,” with its basis in the nation’s steady irascibility and spirit, operates slowly and collectively, throughout the social body, and creates a convergence of a historical situation with Scottishness, embodied and acted on at a decisive moment.

In his View of the Progress of Society in Europe Robertson presents a bigger, more cosmopolitan picture, 64 in which the insensible is yet more powerfully connected to the feelings required for enlightenment to emerge. In that volume he consistently turns to the idiom to depict the crucial processes that make the progress indicated by the title possible. Robertson writes of the rise of cities as a stimulation to the people’s dormant sensibilities, “The
acquisition of liberty made such a happy change in the condition of all the members of communities, as roused them from that stupidity and inaction into which they had been sunk by the wretchedness of their former state” (35–36). Near the paragraph’s conclusion, he remarks that “all became sensible” of the benefits of a well-regulated society, but at the climax, all this spirit and sensibility becomes diffuse: “laws and subordination, as well as polished manners, took their rise in cities, and diffused themselves insensibly through the rest of society” (36). For sentiment to create civilizational progress, it must be insensibly collectivized.

On this passage Daniele Francesconi has remarked that “the ‘silent or insensible revolution’ in the manners, a phrase used also by Hume, was a keyword in the eighteenth-century language of the unintended consequences.” But again it is worth stressing the special relation between the refinement of manners—the components of heightened social feeling—and the insensible. Unlike a range of other unintended consequences, sentiment is especially susceptible to, or stands especially in need of, affective forces beyond feeling. Certainly it can work the other way too: feelings may also coarsen or be corrupted insensibly. But the insensible recurs as a conduit through which sensibility may enhance its historical role, a way to generalize the effect of enhanced feeling, making it more than the experience of a few enlightened minds.

Later passages in the View of the Progress of Society in Europe extend this use of insensible to characterize a yet more diffused sociability among European nations. The term proves vital to Robertson’s version of the Voltairean (or Humean) thèse royale, the idea that enhanced royal power and centralization of authority promote progressive political developments, yet it involves several monarchs across the continent, not just one. The benefits of a balance of power in Europe could for a long time be foreseen by its kings—they were not stupid—but they lacked the authority over “civil government” (90) that they needed to exert themselves on its behalf. A range of factors increased crown authority in general (France’s recovery of its territory from England, the subsequent creation of standing armies, etc.) by putting conditions favorable to it in place: “But during the course of the fifteenth century, various events happened, which, by giving Princes more entire command of the force in their respective dominions, rendered their operations more vigorous and extensive. In consequence of this, the affairs of different kingdoms becoming more frequently as well as more intimately connected, they were gradually accustomed to act in concert and confederacy, and were insensibly prepared for forming a system of policy, in order to establish or to preserve such a balance of power as was most consistent with the general security” (90).
The passive language ("various events happened") indicates that greater monarchical power, long desired by "Princes," ultimately depends on factors beyond their control. Further, the deliberate policy of the balance of power itself follows princes’ gradually increasing tendency to accustom themselves to it. Power and policy lag behind circumstance and custom in the construction of a European balance crucial to modern civilization. A few pages later, Robertson will remark on how various royal marriages, wars in Italy, military innovations, and so on, none deliberately aimed at a balance of power, nonetheless produce it: "These engaged them in such a series of enterprizes and negociations, that the affairs of all the considerable nations in Europe came to be insensibly interwoven with each other; and a great political system was gradually formed, which grew to be an object of universal attention" (104). Though Robertson will at times remark that the notion of balance among European nations indeed deliberately guided participants in the midst of this process, he is attracted to the idea that the system arose insensibly and was attended to as a system and a policy only after it was established.

The civilizational function of the unfelt extends, in Robertson’s History of America, to a context and a set of factors and forces unprecedented in Eurocentric historiography. The right kind of unfeeling discreetly distinguishes European tribes, no matter how “barbaric” or “rude” they are, from the peoples of North America, who are insensible in the wrong way. In the early pages Robertson describes the formation, over centuries, of conditions leading to Europeans’ desire to explore the world: with “the rude tribes which settled there [in the western provinces of the Roman Empire], acquiring insensibly some idea of regular government, and some relish for the functions and comforts of civil life, Europe began to awake from its torpid and unactive state.”

Again the causal power of the unfelt tends to heighten a refined capacity to “relish.”

In contrast, the North American tribes (as in Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments, discussed in chapter I) remain trapped in a bad, immobilizing insensibility—a cold insusceptibility—that makes them both brave and uncivilized. The Iroquois “appear to be not only insensible of pain, but to court it,” Robertson writes, but this “magnanimity . . . instead of exciting admiration, or calling forth sympathy, exasperates the fierce spirits of their torturers to fresh acts of cruelty.” The contrast demonstrates the difference between an insensible process that civilizes and enlightens and the insensitivity that simply blocks civilization. The idiom’s gestural blankness again allows it to play a role in solving historiographical problems: one kind of unfeeling advances, another retards the accession to civil life.
The insensible is not always applied, however, as a finishing element of triumphalist pictures of European cultural advancement. As a blank, it can be used to present deviations from the usual historical script. While historiography of the period generally strikes an optimistic note, especially when treating the transition from feudalism to the modern age, the unfelt at times provides an opening to less predictable or complacent narrative currents. For instance, in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Adam Ferguson, in keeping with his work’s less sanguine views of progress, remarks, “MANKIND, when they degenerate, and tend to their ruin, as well as when they improve, and gain real advantages, frequently proceed by slow, and almost insensible, steps. If, during ages of activity and vigour, they fill up the measure of national greatness to a height which no human wisdom could at a distance foresee; they actually incur, in ages of relaxation and weakness, many evils which their fears did not suggest, and which, perhaps, they had thought far removed by the tide of success and prosperity.”

Here, too, the insensible addresses the transformations in feeling wrought by unfeeling—either those feelings fostered by “activity and vigour” or those by “relaxation and weakness.” In each case, the insensible and the unforeseeable are identified, though the vigor seems the unforeseen product of progress, and relaxation the unnoticed cause of degeneration. And in both, the character of the feeling carries with it a kind of obliviousness to its own historical tendency. While historians use the unfelt to narrate a mysterious process whereby civilization advances affectively in ways the exceed the immediate feelings of individual agents, its blankness allows them also to narrate collective failures of enlightenment.