Chapter Two

The Rules of Sympathy

The piecemeal fashioning of a global apparatus of colonial governmentality was nowhere more prolific than in the mobilizations and reforms that dominated the political, economic, and social agenda in Britain toward the end of the eighteenth century. This social agenda emerged through the rhetoric and practice of sympathy. In the next two chapters, I seek to give a social and discursive overview of the role of sympathy in the late eighteenth century. I analyze sympathy as a mode of European power, as a discursive practice that was a pedagogy of identification. To sympathize with another, one must identify with that other: In the struggle against slavery, for instance, sympathy was both instrument and object, both script and performance in the formation of a new kind of national, racialized, gendered subject—in both the colony and the metropole. For most abolitionists the act of sympathizing was the enabling condition for the overthrow of slavery. But it was a paradoxical mode of power. The difference of race, and often of gender that divided the object and agent of sympathy was precisely that which must be bridged, effaced even, through a certain process of identification. Yet without such differences, which were inequalities of power, sympathy could not function; one might say that sympathy produced the very inequality it sought to bridge. In this chapter, I argue that these paradoxes, and the multiple forms of power that they entail, are legible in the torsions and shifts in the sympathy of eighteenth-century philosophy. I focus on the way in which sympathy is deployed in the emerging discipline of aesthetics as a kind of useful labor of the terrorized imagination and body; or as it is posited as a universal, natural instinct that founds society and social relations (which are themselves thought of as relations of sympathy). In the texts of moral philosophy, I track how the sympathetic procedure broaches questions of
benevolence, justice, social good, and utility. I mark how the undecidable frontier between nature and culture, that sympathy both bridges and demarcates, is appropriated, or made proper, homogeneous, and stable. In this process, sympathy becomes a kind of discipline; through a consideration of the “time” of sympathy, I connect this history of sympathy to the rise of market and utilitarian discipline. But, and at the same time, this gesture of appropriation is marked by a certain call of “something else altogether,” one that obliges us to consider the more general text of other histories. I turn first to a provisional narrative that situates the rise of sentiment, pity, and the sensual in three areas of European thought, that is, moral philosophy, aesthetics, and medical discourse.

The Emergence of Sympathy

From the fifteenth century on, the European concept of sympathy (in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and somewhat later, in English) referred primarily to a “(real or supposed) affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other” (Oxford English Dictionary). Throughout this period, sympathy named that “relation between two bodily organs or parts such that disorder, or any condition, of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other.” Through a kind of hidden, or occult metaphorization of pain, sympathy relates body parts (the arm and the leg) or organs (the heart and the stomach), and not only, and sometimes not even primarily, two human subjects. Etymologically rooted in the Greek concept of sumpatheia, “to feel with,” or “having a fellow feeling,” sympathy will always be haunted by the call to suffer for or with another. But a proleptic principle is also part of its impulse: When we sympathize with another’s suffering, we anticipate that we may suffer similarly in the future. For instance, in the Rhetoric, Aristotle defined pity as that “feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. . . . And . . . we feel pity whenever we are in the condition of remembering that similar misfortunes have happened to us or ours, or expecting them to happen in the future.” This sense of a threatening future and this return of the past would come to assume a new social function in the practice and pedagogy of eighteenth-century sympathy: To sympathize with another was also to think, to project, and of course to calculate on one’s own spiritual and material future.

In the rapidly industrializing contexts of eighteenth-century England, there was a growing preoccupation with the concept of sympathy among