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Affect Theory and Literary Criticism

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Abstract

The "affective turn" is by now long established, part of a wider surge of interest in emotion playing out in a range of disciplines. In literary studies, the conversation about how affect theory might help us to interpret literature is still emerging. The goal of the present discussion is to provide a critical overview of work by scholars who draw on the insights of recent theory to read literary texts written in English. At the same time that the discussion offers an appraisal of the current state of scholarship, it also seeks to identify emerging new directions in research.

Keywords
affect theory, emotions in literature, literary criticism, Silvan Tomkins, Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi

Introduction

The "affective turn" is by now long established, having touched at last count a score of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, part of a wider surge of interest in emotion playing out in different traditions—in critical theory, in philosophy, in affective science. In its variety this work poses both opportunity and challenge for scholars interested in interdisciplinarity, as attention to affect manifests particularly in each field, in ways that are not always immediately apparent to disciplinary outsiders. In literary studies, the conversation about how affect theory might help us interpret literature is still emerging. The goal of the present discussion is to provide a useful critical overview of work by scholars who draw on the insights of recent theory to read literary texts written in English. Given the multifarious lines of thinking that have been categorized under the broad heading Affect Theory over the past couple of decades, there could be many ways to proceed with such an assignment. My brief here will be to consider the relevance to literary criticism of theoretical perspectives concerned with affect as force or impetus manifested in bodies, and so encompasses approaches to literature influenced by the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins as well as philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The discussion is informed by other approaches often placed under the affect theory umbrella, such as work by scholars who seek to uncover how appeals to affective engagement in literary depictions of everyday life compel citizens to feel and act in ways that conform to dominant ideology. My main focus here will not be on such approaches, though, for while they offer powerful tools for critique they are interested in investigating the cultural politics of emotion, really, rather than in affect as a phenomenon tending to the more biological than cultural in genesis and effect.[1]

The genealogy of the lines of theory in question is by now well known, with the watershed year of 1995 seeing the publication both of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins" and of Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect." These interventions were driven expressly by a desire to find a way out of the orthodoxies of their critical moment. Inspired by the work of Tomkins, Sedgwick, and Frank saw accounting for affect as a way to move beyond the limitations of poststructuralist critique, with its drive to unmask the ideological workings of a field of binary opposites, manifested in cultural artifacts to be decoded according to the logic of a linguistic model of representation. In literary studies, such critique was exemplified by Deconstruction (under the aegis of Jacques Derrida) and then in turn by New Historicism (Michel Foucault). Similarly frustrated with the governing paradigm for critique, Massumi sought to move away from abstract conceptions of

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"The Body" and to think instead about actual bodies embedded in and affected by networks of relation.[2] A guiding principle of both interventions was that attending to the biologically rooted operations of affect/s rather than giving primacy to abstracted Reason or Theory might blur the boundaries between self and other—and so offer a more complete picture of what it means to be human, one that by being attuned to the richness of affective interrelation might respect all actors even while it might seem to efface difference.

These approaches are different in kind, both in their fundamental assumptions and in how the theory might be applied by others, with Tomkins's model concerned with how the individual builds social scripts shaped by the stimulus–response circuits of hardwired affect-pairs, and with Massumi concerned with affect not as a property of individual psychology, but as manifestations of a force of intensity that—because a phenomenon that impinges on the embodied subject—is in nature not personal but rather prepersonal. Taken together, these two visions of affective life have had a profound impact on research in the humanities and social sciences, encouraging scholars to give voice to what had been unnoticed or ignored by the traditions in which they grew up. Literature has, of course, been preoccupied for millennia with the affective dimension of human experience, and critics in the European tradition as far back as Aristotle have theorized the affective engagements of characters, of authors, of readers—and different forms such as poems, plays, and, recently, novels (see Daly, 2015) have developed to depict these engagements; just what is new is my focus here. In the following discussion I provide a sense of how literary scholars working in a range of historical archives have drawn on two of the main lines of affect theory so far, and along the way offer a case study of my own to show how engaging with recent theorizations of affect might help the critic elucidate the literary text in productive ways. Always front of mind, I suggest, should be guiding questions of relevance and utility, as we ask: just what explanatory power is affect theory affording me here as a critic? and, what can the insights of the theory help me *do* with a text?

Primary Affects and Literary Analysis: Reading the Script

The strain of theory more in line with psychological as well as vernacular understandings of how we are affected by strong feelings is the one developed by Silvan Tomkins over many decades, primarily in his magnum opus *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962–1992). In developing his model Tomkins (1995b) sought to solve the age-old puzzle of what motivates humans to want what they want. Offering the affect system as "the primary motivational system in humans" (p. 34), Tomkins believed he had found a way to escape the dualistic thinking that emerged in Western thought to address this question, pitting dreams of reason, of spirit, of a radical free will (exemplified by Platonic idealism) against the biological determinism of bodily drives (exemplified by Freudian psychoanalysis). Tomkins views the affect system as intermediary between drive system and cognition system, with nine primary affect-pairs each working according to an independent logic of physiological response to and amplification of the input of basic drives, in turn activating through magnification cognition and behavior in a perpetual process of feedback. The individual, having experienced affectively charged "scenes," the basic unit of experience, creates "scripts" to make sense of and guide their response to situations in life (1995a). Tomkins' model of the affect system is not behaviorist but, rather, capacious enough to account for the complexities of social context and individual personality. Key to Sedgwick and Frank's belief in the value of Tomkins's model is that it is not binary, not governed by the on/off of the digital, but rather analog, making room for infinite points on a finite spectrum of response, and so up to the challenge of accounting for the individual human animal embodied and embedded in culture—for life in all its messiness (1995).

Sedgwick and Frank's championing of Tomkins's model brought him to the attention of literary critics, and when their essay became a cornerstone of Sedgwick's influential collection *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), his work reached a wider audience. Among literary critics, Tomkins' influence has been muted … or, perhaps more accurately, his work on the shame–humiliation nexus has been largely transmuted, through the mediating lens of Sedgwick's (1993) focus on shame as driver of a mode of "queer performativity" in literary writing. It's the attunement and attention to the *literariness* of her archive that makes Sedgwick's politically activist writings so rich and nuanced. Critics of literature and film have found Sedgwick's theorizing of the psychology and politics of shame immensely productive, even if they do not always engage directly or at length with Tomkins's theory. Lastingly influential has been Heather Love's recuperation of negative affects such as queer melancholia to connect to traditions of resistance, a project underwritten by the contention that "persistent attention to 'useless' feelings is all about action: about how and why it is blocked, and about how to locate motives for political action when none is visible" (2007, p. 13). Recent work that draws on Sedgwick and Tomkins to consider the psychological and political effects of shame on minoritized communities includes Monica Pearl's exploration of the dynamics of intimacy, shame, and the closet in James Baldwin's fiction (2020), and Stephanie Fetta's investigation of "literary renderings of the cultural practice of racial shaming" in *Shaming into Brown: Somatic Transactions of Race in Latina/o Literature* (2018, p. 6). Other scholars have productively

applied Tomkins's theory of shame to literary analysis, if not always explicitly tied to an emancipatory politics (e.g., Hallemeier, 2013; Roberts, 2019; Steen, 2018).

The other line of influence of Tomkins's work has been application of his script theory for literary interpretation. The most substantial and systematic study is Duncan Lucas' *Affect Theory, Genre, and the Example of Tragedy: Dreams We Learn* (2018), which seeks to "draw out consistent, significant, but largely unacknowledged emotional content in tragedy" (p. 3). Lucas applies Tomkins's systems theory approach to the study of genre, finding commonalities in character psychology and narrative structure in the several plays he reads as case studies. By applying Tomkins's ideas about primary affects and affect-scripts to playscripts from a 2500-year historical and cultural spread, Lucas concludes that his observations "lean toward the possibility of emotional universals" (p. 3). Other work that applies script theory to literature (e.g., Bak, 2006; Ferens, 2021) shows just how amenable Tomkins's model is to the study of narrative. Perhaps the most intriguingly original investigation inspired by Tomkins's work is Adam Frank's book-length re-visioning of the site of writing and reading in American literature as fundamentally relational. In his study of writers and artists from the 1840s to the 1980s, Frank "discern[s] in the work of these artists an acutely receptive and reflexive attention to the movement of feeling across and between text and reader, or composition and audience" (2015, p. 1). To account for such movements Frank develops a heuristic model of "transferential poetics" drawing on the theories of Tomkins, Melanie Klein, and Wilfred Bion.

Clearly Tomkins's work on affect has sparked productive interest—and yet given all the talk about affect over the past couple of decades, it's notable that overall his model has not made great inroads into the practice of professional literary criticism, even during a period of openness to varied approaches, when for the first time in a long time there has been no doctrinaire way to "do" critical analysis driven by a thinker such as a Freud, Derrida, or Foucault. Perhaps the relative lack of interest in taking inspiration from Tomkins's vision of the affect system stems from what the editors of the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Emotion* diagnose as an aversion among humanities and social science scholars to the kind of universalizing impetus behind Basic Emotions Theory approaches of the kind that Tomkins and Paul Ekman have developed (Hogan & Irish, 2022). Even as they introduced Tomkins to a wider readership, Sedgwick and Frank (1995) themselves testified to their own queasiness with the "scientism" of his approach. The question of whether or not the resistance among those who investigate cultural phenomena is warranted is an ongoing concern. I'll suggest in the next section that perhaps the reluctance of humanists to embrace the findings of affective neuroscience, or the other "psy-" disciplines, is more about the questions researchers in literary studies seek to ask, as well as the characteristics of their objects of study. (When one is faced not with a brain to be scanned by fMRI, but a text to be read with attunement to its formal devices, the requirements for interpretation are categorically different).

Still, Tomkins's affect-pairs can provide a useful taxonomy for literary critics reading texts from different historical periods, particularly when scenes in narratives can read as familiar scripts, preordained by the rules of genre and plot, and when a character's motives and actions can be seen to be playing out the psychological phenomena Tomkins describes. Systems such as his that seek to capture the features of discrete affects or emotions (or, to use older cognate terms, passions, affections, sentiments) have been common and influential in Western thought since the Ancients. For my part, Tomkins's affect-pairs can be viewed much as the affective terms in circulation in a given historical period in a given cultural milieu: they help the critic grasp the significance of what's going on in a particular text, whether it's a fictional work such as a novel, play, or poem, or a work of nonfiction such as a personal diary, political speech, or philosophical treatise. It's just that one needs to be careful about the claims to be made, the lessons to be drawn. Broadly speaking, approaching earlier literature informed by the insights of the history of emotions may help us pay attention to the conceptual paradigms and terms for emotion available at the time, and so to grasp what's at stake in the moments of heightened affect that punctuate literary texts in the European tradition from the plays of Sophocles to the novels of Jane Austen and beyond.[3] Not to do so, to instead assume that our current paradigms have universal applicability through time, is to risk falling into the presentism that can mark readings blind to the fact that past cultures, in at least to some meaningful degree, did not understand affective life in the way we do now (whoever that "we" might be).

Useful for the literary critic is work by scholars like Ute Frevert (2014) and Louise Joy (2020) to situate emotion terms in the contexts of their historical use. Particularly instructive is Thomas Dixon's (2012) contention that *emotion* as we now understand it becomes available only in the mid-19th century—and so it is anachronistic to use the term to account for earlier representations of affective phenomena. Rather, in preceding centuries the concept-term that had currency was the more indeterminate *passion*, seen as a force that drives human desire and action—a kindred spirit perhaps to recent conceptions of theorists striving to articulate the potential of the body to be affected. Passion acts as an external force that impinges on a body, rather than an internal movement that burgeons into a mental state that can be reflected upon by the individual who feels. In its lesser manifestations, passion exerts influence below the threshold of conscious awareness and so of cognition, while in its more vehement operations, passion can annihilate the self-presence of an embodied mind that becomes unable

to process the onslaught of stimulus to which it is subject. (Crucial to note is that both *passion* and *passive* derive from the Latin root *passio*, "to suffer" or "to be moved.") Thinkers in the early modern period also strove to identify categories of *the passions*; among the most relevant to recent thinking is Charles Le Brun, the 17th-century French artist and academician whose drawings of individuals in the grip of passions such as anger, sadness, fear, or joy can be seen as a precursor to Paul Ekman's work on facial expressions as index of basic emotions in test subjects.

In a way, though, I would say that for a critic drawing on either Tomkins's or Massumi's model, a need to "always historicize" (the rallying cry of New Historicism) is not the prime directive, as the whole point is that either model rests on a sense that there is a universal structure to human psychology, embedded as we are in relations of interdependence with phenomena that affect us profoundly. The fact that many texts from different eras recognizably portray the workings of affective intensities as they move through characters would seem to demonstrate a transhistorical truth value to the Massumi–Deleuzean model. Yet critics who've grown up in an age of healthy suspicion of the political costs of universalizing wonder whether embracing such models merely reinscribes a retrograde assumption that Western ways of thinking and feeling are the best—even the only—ways available. This is a fundamental concern, analogous to Sedgwick and Frank's apprehension three decades ago as they drew on the insights of a systems theory approach to psychology to break out of the constructivist–essentialist impasse that had straightjacketed critical discourse. This problematic won't be resolved here, but I hope the next sections of the discussion will help show the value to the literary critic of a model that, even if it raises legitimate questions of epistemic and political consequence, wields an explanatory force that cannot be ignored.

Affect as Intensity: Accounting for Traces on the Page

The most widely influential line of recent theory takes its inspiration from Brian Massumi's reading of Gilles Deleuze's work on philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson. This vision of affect forms a major strain of what has come to be called nonrepresentational theory, which "tries to capture the 'onflow' … of everyday life"; this line of theory "follows the anti-substantialist ambition of philosophies of becoming and philosophies of vitalist intuition equally—and their constant war on frozen states" (Thrift, 2007, p. 5). A serious challenge for those encountering engagements with Massumi–Deleuzean theory is that seems counterintuitive, in that it upends centuries of thinking in the Western tradition by rejecting the notion of a stable self. The theory disrupts perhaps most forcefully commonsense understandings of affective agency, by asserting a distinction between affect and emotion: the first, a phenomenon that is "prepersonal" and eludes cognition, while the second, something that is brought into the personal as a result of "the *capture* and closure of affect" (1995, p. 96; emphasis in original).[4] By insisting on the importance of accounting for affect, Massumi opened up two revolutionary insights for the literary critic: that the assumptions of conventional character psychology depended on a radically inaccurate model of human agency; and that there exists a whole category of important phenomena, a whole field of data, to analyze that had been neglected by earlier critical approaches (those of the 1970s through the 1990s based on discourse and ideology—and before that, the methods of New Criticism that had reigned from the 1940s through the 1960s, and ruled as out of court any discussion of affective effects). So the nonrepresentational nature of affect required new modes of inquiry, marked by an openness to exploring the relevance of what might seem like outlandish concepts for the study of literature. Unlike with countable and containable "affects" or "emotions," the operations of "affect" as concept, as noncount noun, as central element of an ontology of being, would be delineated using philosophical thinking and rhetorical analysis, rather than demonstrated by the experimental methods of affective science.

Literary critics have profitably explored the workings of affective intensities in different historical archives over the past decade or so. One of the most illuminating is Wan-Chuan Kao's reading of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, a text first published in 1400. His analysis is guided by an understanding that "premodern theories of affect [are] rooted in humoral theory and faculty psychology," and the insight that medieval conceptions of "emotion" overlap with contemporary understandings of "affect" as biologically rooted, prediscursive, and unconscious (2019, p. 26). Kao draws on both strains of recent affect theory to produce a compelling reading, drawing on Tomkins to argue that a "wonder-shame script" is at work in the narrative, and contending that Chaucer's character inhabits a Deleuzean "fourth-person singular" that "constitutes itself as an identity position simultaneously virtual and actual" (p. 33). Kao sees a space for freedom in Chaucer's tale, based in a "figuration of premodern queer futurity that shifts the affective locus of queerness away from the binarism of negative and positive affects, without losing sight of both" (p. 26). Mengni Kang (2022), considering a text written over five centuries later, reads Italo Calvino's metafictional narrative *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* using the standard tools of narratology and also to great effect the insights of the Deleuzean conception of affect as force of encounter. On her account, "Calvino's work destroys the illusion of realism by disrupting the boundary of fiction and reality from the outset…. As the narrative proceeds, the protean 'you' narration and tangled narrative levels further create metaleptic effects, challenge readers' cognitive architecture, and cause interpretive difficulties" (p. 52). Because readers are confronted with

multiple readings on different levels, they are embedded in the entanglements of the text and so cannot decode the narrative but only try to find their way through it. Kang draws on the concept of affectivity "to comprehend such force of encounter which baffles cognition." This analytical approach allows her to explore how Calvino's work "gives rise to affective responses that elude readers' intellectual control and the effects these responses exert on interpretive activities." Affect, she notes, "cannot be accounted for by subjectivity and refuses to be cognitively grasped"; as a result, she says (quoting Adorno), the affectivity of the text "invites readers to 'disappear into the material'" (p. 53). Kang's work is quite unique in considering primarily the effect on readers of the affective charge of complex narrative structure. Other recent works of literary criticism apply the insights of this line of theory to elucidate the literary text as text (e.g., Hsieh, 2017; LeClerc, 2021; Ringer, 2014; Rowner, 2015; Sodano, 2019; Taylor, 2015).

In the Archive, With Feeling

As with any viable method or framework for research, the tools offered by affect theory need to be relevant to the contexts and evidence sets of a given discipline. The archive I work in—the literary culture of 18th-century Britain—is particularly amenable to investigations of affect as intensity, as this was a time marked by widespread preoccupation with heightened feeling. Writers working in various genres portrayed in exhaustive detail the psychophysiological impacts on both actual and virtual/fictional thinking-feeling bodies of forceful encounters with the world. In the impassioned world of early romance narrative, for instance, seduction begins with a process of influence that takes hold below the threshold of conscious awareness. The transmission of affect—to use Theresa Brennan's (2004) influential formulation—happens without warning or intent, as characters are drawn involuntarily to one another. This movement may happen all of a sudden and with great vehemence in moments of high drama. Or, in situations of lower intensity, characters may find affection steal upon them without their knowledge. At work at such times is a model of "unfelt" affect that James Noggle (2020) has shown pervades all forms of prose writing during the 18th century, including philosophy, historiography, and political economy, as well as literature. The operations of the unfelt are revealed in words such as "imperceptibly" that indicate the ways in which human processes can be affected significantly yet subtly, as the influence of a burgeoning potential to be moved escapes the subject's attention. Noggle's analysis draws on recent theorizations of affect that posit affective intensities as impersonal, even prepersonal, as autonomous forces that can circulate among feeling bodies in ways that escape the emotional knowledge of affected individuals. This relation governs the idiom of the unfelt, which "portrays people as objects of insensible processes rather than subjects of 'insensible emotions'" (p. 7). In early novels, Noggle notes, unfelt affects "often decisively delineate character, advance plot, and confer a distinctive texture on narrative" (p. 69).

My own reading of 18th-century fiction demonstrates this phenomenon, especially with regard to works written in a romance mode that is preoccupied primarily with interpersonal relationships. Jane Austen's novels, for instance, each feature a female protagonist learning to navigate a complex social world, whose challenges include the need to comprehend the workings of her own heart as well as the feelings and motives of others. *Sense and Sensibility*, first drafted in the 1790s, is a particularly fruitful archive in which to investigate depictions of the force of affective intensities in the early novel. On almost every page, it seems, the Dashwood sisters and their suitors are subject to fits of excessive feeling, which generate cognitive confusion as well as somatic effects that range in degree from blushing, to sighing, to hovering on the brink of paralysis, even loss of consciousness. A major threat that Elinor and Marianne have to contend with is internal, or at least stems from the exigencies of embodied being. Both find themselves baffled by turns of events that come upon them suddenly, leaving them "confused," "amazed," and "perplexed." They find it hard in the moment to process the data, to grasp the import, of what they are experiencing, and are left unable to direct the operations of a body that betrays their affected state to the world at large. Marianne's first encounter with dashing John Willoughby in the countryside offers a typical instance of such response. After she has fallen and Willoughby has raised her onto his horse and then brought her home, we learn that "the confusion which crimsoned over her face … had robbed her of the power of regarding him after their entering the house" (p. 33). In Austen and other early novelists the disorder generated at such junctures by arousal of the affect system is displayed on the body. Notably, such effects are not necessarily coded as negative, for affect is content-neutral. Not a matter of substance but of mode, affect is manifested in intensity whose impact depends on modulation and context. Heightened affect is experienced as disruption, as a rupture in the felt sense of not just the ordinary, but its extra–.[5] Such threshold intervals, charged as they are with a surfeit of energy and of signification, produce a loss of psychic self-possession. (In this scene, such a result is evidenced by Marianne's being "robbed of the power" to direct her gaze.) A sudden shift from the everyday and comprehensible, to a state of being that's more liminal and uncontrolled, can spur a range of effects, depending on the intensity of the impinging affect and the consequences for the character who is moved. At one extreme, we see Austen's characters fall into a pensive "reverie," and at the other, a catatonic "stupor."

I hope this brief case study goes some way to showing how the insights of recent affect theory might help us better see what's "on the page" in early fiction.[6] The question

of what's at stake in these moments of excess is something I'm still trying to get ahold of (as many narrators in early novels know and tell their readers, it's hard to express the inexpressible). But what is clear to me is that Massumi—following Spinoza—is on to something profound when he finds great import in the fact that "the body, when impinged upon … [is] in a state of passional suspension in which it exists more outside of itself, more in the abstracted action of the impinging thing and the abstracted context of that action, than within itself" (2002, p. 31). Paradoxical though it sounds, it's in the state of *suspension* that a space opens for transformation. In early fiction, what's held out is a space for reconciliation, for an at-least-momentary bridging of the gap between self and other, and of an erasure of gender, class, race, even species, difference—this is the promise of the moment of sentimental communion when, overwhelmed by the affective charge, bodies and worlds collide.

Questions of Method: Challenges of the Ineffable

All well and good as a singular example, one might say, but the challenge remains that it's hard to account for phenomena that resist determinate definition. As Laurie Ringer notes, "Affect can … educe the unmediated experience of emotion as an event"; more broadly, "With affect theory, subjectivity becomes an ongoing event that arises from the movements of the body rather than the machinations of language" (2014, paras. 11–12). To attend to this insight is exciting … but how to proceed when the machinations of language are all that's offered by a literary text?

Affective phenomena are particularly difficult to study, because, in the case of affect as intensity, fleeting, precognitive, even prepersonal; and in the case of primary affects, because driven by biologically based motivators of behavior that can function in the first instance outside of willful self-control. While such phenomena exert material effects, they evince immaterial properties. And so the editors of *Affective Methodologies: Developing Cultural Research Strategies for the Study of Affect* state that their collection "reacts to a challenge: How to trace and understand the immaterial forces of affects as cultural researchers?" (Knudsen & Stage, 2015). Social scientists have developed ways to study affective phenomena with an eye to method that can provide some guidance to scholars from other disciplines. Still, the challenge faced by the sociologist studying impingements on actual bodies in networks of relation is compounded for the literary critic, whose object of study is not the real, but the fictional, given form not in vital matter but in words. The particular challenge for scholars whose archive is textual, and so composed of mere marks on a page, is how to trace the contours of phenomena described by nonrepresentational theory when the experience of affective charge is not immediate but, rather, mediated by a symbolic system: written language.

And yet there is perhaps not so radical a category difference as might first appear, because—and here a profound insight of Deleuzean thinking comes in—phenomena always encompass the virtual as well as the real, are about potentiality in the process of becoming, even when actualized in a singular instance of body or art, flesh or fiction. Jean-Michel Rabaté (2016) provides deep insight into this metaphysics of aesthetic creation in his reading of Deleuze and Félix Guattari's late essay "Percept, Affect and Concept" (1994), about which Rabaté notes that "no single text was more influential" in "launch[ing] the critical vocabulary of affects" (pp. 88–89). Deleuze's vision is that "the task of art is to invent affects" (p. 89). Critically, such affects are not representations of the felt emotions of an author, or a character, or a reader. Instead they are something of an entirely different order, for, "caught by art, sensible matter creates its own eternity, even if it is to last an instant. Affects are autonomous, unattached to a perceiving subject, eternally out there in their stubborn materiality" (p. 90). All of this runs counter, of course, to the desire of psychoanalytic critics to psychologize character, or of cognitivists to tease out stable mental states marked by self-possessed motives. Observing that for Deleuze "What matters is not psychology" (p. 91), Rabaté offers a cogent summary of Deleuze's aesthetic theory, as follows: "Avoiding any subjectivist projection when defining art as the invention of new emotions, Deleuze combines his philosophy of expression with his objectivist anti-humanism. On this view, art produces monuments that are self-sufficient because it creates an autonomous universe that should not be read as the transmutation or sublimation of human passions and affections" (p. 89). Ilai Rowner helps to further clarify the ontology that underpins Deleuze's understanding of art and/as affects, noting that "when Deleuze suggests thinking about art and literature in *What Is Philosophy*? he demands that the 'affect' and 'percept' of the work be considered as pre-individual and impersonal expressions of becoming, yet absolutely not as the 'affection' and 'perception' of the personal experience of the represented characters or of the writer's psychology" (2015, p. 158).

How might we bring these big ideas to bear on a particular text? Denise Riley has written eloquently of the power of writing to affect the reader, not by forging some kind of authentic connection between flesh-and-blood writer and reader, but through the generative properties of the medium itself. Language, Riley contends, does not represent feeling but "does feeling" (2000, p. 36): the text produces effects on the reader through deployment of formal elements and techniques (see Houen, 2020). Riley's innovation is to focus not on how *we* use words to do things, but rather—in a clever inversion of J. L. Austen's famous book title—"How Words Do Things With Us" (Riley, 2005, p. 3). Riley captures the interpenetrating relation of words to self

when she observes: "There is a forcible affect of language which courses like blood through its speakers. Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal" (p. 1). This may seem paradoxical as a claim, but comes to make great sense as Riley investigates the "unexamined rhetoricity" of complex texts. On Riley's account, how a text might signify is not fully under our control, for the affective power of language can "outrun" a writer's intentions (p. 4). This challenge is perhaps especially true when a writer is striving to represent that which resists representation: operations of affect/s that, while powerful motivators, are manifested in fleeting flashes. As a medium might written expression not just get in the way, but perhaps bridge the epistemic and affective gap between writer and reader? Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs certainly believe in this potential to be moved when they note that "Language remains a sensory as well as a symbolic medium, since both written and spoken forms have rhythms, textures, and tones" (2009, p. 166).

Thinking/Writing/Reading Feeling

For literary critics writing on emotion and literature, there has emerged a divide (Hogan, 2016; Miller, 2017). On one hand, we have the kind of cognitivist approach that's been a strain in literary criticism for some decades now, influenced by how philosophers, and recently neuroscientists, view emotions as intentional mental states. A number of recent contributions to thinking about emotion and literature largely take this approach, even if they might include some ecumenical gestures toward other approaches such as affect theory and the history of emotions (Hogan, Irish & Hogan, 2022; Wehrs & Blake, 2017). On the other hand, we have affect as read by those influenced by Tomkins and more strikingly by Massumi—which is something very different,[7] as work by critics engaging with literary texts across many periods shows, and as a scattering of articles a decade ago is now building to a critical mass. My own edited collection, *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text* (Ahern, 2019), assembles critics writing on the operations of affect in various literary genres and in eras ranging from the medieval to the postmodern, and at the same time offers a broad meditation on the usefulness of both the Massumi–Deleuzean and the Tomkins strains to the literary critic. Other studies focus on the literature and culture of a particular historical period, drawing on the various trajectories of affect theory to elucidate their particular archive (e.g., Bailey & DiGangi, 2017; Rabaté, 2016; Vermeulen, 2015).

Might there be a way to reconcile cognitivist and affect-theoretical approaches to reading literary depictions of affectively rich moments? The ostensible gulf between the two can be quickly characterized. On one side, we have the assertion by a leading proponent for taking a cognitive approach to literature that "An emotion is fundamentally a system of the mind, with a neural and somatic substrate, that motivates motor or cognitive behavior" (Hogan & Irish, 2022, p. 2). For both Tomkins and Massumi, however, the somatic comes first, not just as a matter of timing but of importance. Tomkins does not deny the role of cognition, but gives primary importance to how the affect system amplifies the motivating impetus of the drive system and then informs cognition through an ongoing process of feedback. For Massumi and for followers such as Brennan (2004) and Thrift (2007), affect is a force that operates outside an individual's control—it does things *to* people, to animals, to objects, and cannot be taken in and parsed into submission. Nothing I am saying here is new, of course—and my sense is that cognitivists working in traditions of analytic philosophy and of experimental science on the one hand, and affect theorists influenced by process philosophy and (post)poststructuralist critical theory on the other, are at base interested in something different—and so perhaps are less talking at cross purposes than in different rooms asking different questions about the literature that is their shared object of study. Patrick Colm Hogan suggests that these differences may add up not to weakness but to strength, as "each group has something to learn from the other" (2016, p. 2).

Perhaps a way forward is emerging. In his recent introduction to the edited collection *Affect and Literature* (2020), Alex Houen strives to "build the case for an approach that is neither strictly cognitivist nor noncognitivist, and that is open to considering literary affect in terms of fusions of content and style" (p. 5). As he offers an efficient summary of positions on what is often seen as a cognitivist–noncognitivist divide, Houen argues that the now common idea that such a divide may seem unreconcilable stems from misreadings of foundational texts—especially those by Massumi and Tomkins and their interpreters. In so doing Houen sets up his own model for understanding literary affect, one that depends on treading a middle path that does not support "an opposition of bodily affect versus emotion and cognition" (p. 5). Houen contends that "the suspended status of literary writing presents a reader with distinctly aesthetic forms of feeling that can be experienced as exerting their own affective force despite the suspension" (p. 16). He demonstrates this thesis using Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts* as a case study, moving through close analysis of moments in the narrative that body forth the contours of "a distinctly literary form of affect" (p. 19). At the same time he engages critically with interventions on the qualities of narrative voice (especially resonances of style and tone) made by Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, and Deleuze and Guattari. In so doing Houen offers a model of how we need to attend to the formal and stylistic elements that make a literary text *literary*.

A major impetus of Houen's project is corrective, in that he uses as a springboard to develop his own method a critique of what he sees as the problem with "most cognitivists' approach": that "in conceiving the emotionality of fiction as inter*personal* (character or narrator to reader), they tend

to ignore the role that genre, form, and language can play in imaginatively figuring or transforming affect" (p. 15). I would agree that this problem regularly arises when researchers from other disciplines turn to literature as a corpus of evidence, treating it as another dataset to be processed according to their own methods, methods that set them up to be blind to patterns of generic convention; to read past figurative language (the heart of literary meaning); to have a tin ear when it comes to complexities of narrative voice and structure (and so what a narrator says can be taken in error for the author's opinion, or the ironic ways in which content is framed can be unnoticed). Speaking from the perspective of someone trained in the methods of professional criticism, I would say that the limitation Houen registers often is in evidence when philosophers of emotion are let loose on literary texts. That said, the best characterization I've read of the task at hand comes from one of the leading proponents of a cognitivist approach to literature, English professor Patrick Colm Hogan, who offers an appraisal of the particular challenge of studying literary narrative. "An account of literary affect," he writes,

> needs to consider the various possible locations of emotion in literature. These begin with the real people involved—authors and readers. But they extend to implied authors and implied readers as well as wholly fictional persons, such as narrators and characters. Emotion bears also on scenes and sequences—both the sequence of events as they actually occur in the story and the sequence of events as they are presented in the plot (which may, for example, reveal the outcome of events before revealing their causes). Sometimes, a given narrative level has its own characteristic emotions or affective concerns—such as suspense in the case of plot (suspense is in part a function of when story information is provided). At other times, a given level will merely affect the ways the emotions of other levels are modulated (as when some stylistic features, not funny in themselves, contribute to comic effect). (2016, p. 1)

This is a fulsome if not complete inventory of the rhetorical, stylistic, and narratological features that literary critics are trained to pay attention to. *Is all of this necessary?* a reader might ask. For at the level of paraphrase, at least, imaginative literature often seems to be about more or less realistic depictions of relations among fictional bodies and minds. But form and content are always in a mutually constitutive relation, and literary language is distinguished from other kinds of writing in large measure by qualities of trope and tone. A subtle interpreter of a literary text is attuned to the *how* and not just the *what* when it comes to the factors that shape the reading experience and thereby meaning. There's arguably a special set of features and forces to attend to when considering literary affect. Advances on this front in the past while include insightful contributions by Charles Altieri (2003), working against both historicism and cognitivism, on the phenomenology of affectively engaged reading; by Rita Felski et al. (2012), on the importance of mood as affect concept; by Eugenie Brinkema (2014), on the need to "treat affect as a problematic of structure, form, and aesthetics" (p. xvi); and by John Brenkman (2020), on the rhetoric and poetics of affect.

By Way of a Conclusion ... Notes on Expanding Influence, Emerging Concerns

So where are we now? Interest in affect theory continues to grow, and to have a considerable impact on thinking about cultural products and social life. As happens with any model for cultural analysis once we've lived with it for a while, we have moved beyond the initial excitement, the drama of discovery (which, certainly with the Massumi–Deleuzean line, tended to two extremes: "hey! affect *affects bodies*—this is a revelation!" or "this stuff is really bizarre…"). We are now into what might be called a mature stage of application, which includes clear-eyed considerations of the costs as well as the benefits of such an approach. Such considerations build on earlier interventions that challenged the methodological assumptions of affect-centered analysis, or critiqued as problematic the more blithely hopeful appeals to affect's force as wholly emancipatory in nature.[8] In a round-up of recent publications Carmen Faye Mathes (2022) offers a trenchant analysis of the current state of play, suggesting that her "snapshot of affect theory's development" reveals "myriad approaches bookended by an epistemological divergence" (p. 1). Mathes goes on to explain that

> On one end are studies that embrace affect as an umbrella term for moving beyond emotions in a normative key. In these studies, what affect *does* eclipses what affect is. On the other end are studies that assert dissatisfaction with the world as "given" in theoretical models of affect, particularly as that world is always already colonial, patriarchal, white, and so on.

Tyrone Palmer has criticized with particular insight the prevailing assumption that affect is a content-neutral universal capacity, an assumption that has left the theory and its practitioners blind to the embodied experience of African Americans. Palmer's (2017) essay on "Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect," a consideration of the work of African American poet Claudia Rankine, represents, he says, "an attempt to think affect and blackness in tandem, and to make plain the anti-Black logics that undergird the extant academic discourse of affect theory" (p. 51). Important to quote in full is the charge Palmer makes:

> The point here is not to bemoan the lack of recognition of Black feeling, but rather to make clear the way that anti-blackness permeates even that which is seen to be a universal, prediscursive "human" capacity. Affect theory, in its recourse to the biological and the ontological, has been positioned as the answer to the trappings of "identity" and "difference," yet it offers no language with which to approach the sensorial dimensions of ontological negation. Blackness represents the unthought horizon of affect theory, and in order to understand the persistence of the anti-Black paradigm, we must begin to theorize affect from the position of blackness—to think the unthinkable.

Palmer's corrective is justified and long overdue—and the implications will take time to play out (other interrogations of affect and/as racialization include Cobo-Piñero, 2023; Fetta, 2018; Palmer, 2020, 2023).

As a closing note, I ask whether there might be a way to recuperate a vision of affect as a useful analytic category that does not do violence to cultural difference and minoritized communities. Sneja Gunew's work on cultural translation suggests perhaps a way to do so, in a luminous meditation on an "idea of affect … that does not foreclose too quickly on the reassurance of familiar taxonomies of emotions" (2020, p. 185). Gunew's representative text is a novel by Korean writer Han Kang that depicts a central character gripped by *han*, an affect or emotion that has no equivalent in English but might be described as a kind of anger driven by shame. In grappling with the difficulty of how affective terms and experiences might translate across cultures, Gunew contends that her reading, sensitive to the embodiment of character in another cultural milieu, "raises questions concerning affect as a modality of translation" (p. 185). Moving out more broadly, she continues: "The European 'psy' disciplines have traditionally reinforced the boundaries of a self-contained subjectivity—the manifestation and shoring up of the sovereign self. Exploring affective concepts outside that tradition may enable us to imagine a new materialism, a new corporeality urgently required to deal with the global transformations we face" (p. 185). And so perhaps in a transnational intercultural framework, at least, theorizations of affect may respect cultural difference, rather than, in Palmer's view of national (read: American) intracultural dynamics, reduce all affective analysis to an assumed paradigm of a universalized white personhood—even if considerations of the transmissions of affect are often attended by paeans to a vision of posthuman postsubjectivity.

We will need to continue to work all of this out, but my sense is that, if we view affect as a phenomenon not somehow resistant to critique but rather open to appraisal, affect theory will continue to hold out a promise of explanatory value for scholars from many disciplines for many years to come.

Notes

1. *Note on scope and method.* Given the limited space available for my survey of affect theory's impact on literary criticism, the most compelling reason for not focusing on this third major line of thinking is that almost all of the key contributors have been social scientists—Sara Ahmed, Kathleen Stewart, Margaret Wetherell, and others—who focus on social phenomena and cultural products as their object of study. Thus far, notably few literary scholars have drawn on this line of affect theory specifically to read literary or filmic texts. (Exceptions to this general trend include Libin, 2020; Milne, 2018; and Smith, 2015. Literary scholars whose work in this area has been foundational are few in number but influential; see especially Berlant, 2011; Love, 2007; Ngai, 2005).

   In my opening remarks I draw a distinction between work that interrogates the cultural politics of emotion and work that views affect as a phenomenon tending more to the biological than the cultural. I should take a moment to explain what for some readers might be a surprising, even contentious characterization. All three major lines certainly share an interest in bodily response to affective stimulus, but deploy different models of operations, generally to different ends. One of the most influential founders of the third line of theory, Lauren Berlant, makes the lineage of her approach explicit when she declares that "affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory" (2011, p. 53). In investigating how ideological impingements such as "cruel optimism" work on the individual's affective sensorium, Berlant brings into evidence feelings that are the body's response to the world, something that an individual embedded in community is always "catching up to" (p. 54). The interest here is in the body as another domain in which to uncover the manipulations of ideology. As Berlant notes, such an approach is heir to a Marxist tradition that seeks to capture the psychosocial effects of cultural pressure on the individual, manifested in how citizens are interpellated into affective regimes (Louis Althusser) or caught up in emergent structures of feeling (Raymond Williams). A similar project drives Sara Ahmed's influential analysis of the "stickiness" of affect, which she views as "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs"; what results is an "accumulation of affective value" (2004, p. 90, 92). All of this work is especially interested in building a critique of neoliberalism, of precarity, of alienation in postindustrial Western societies. Such focus on the *now* makes this work current and necessary, but perhaps less applicable for researchers who seek to investigate earlier periods in cultural history, or other societies altogether—or who are interested in the workings of affect not so much as an epiphenomenon of ideology but as a condition of being in the world, whether the focus is on ontology (Deleuze) or psychology (Tomkins).
2. Massumi made this motivation clear when he wrote *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), the book built around the "Autonomy of Affect" essay.
3. On the particular challenges of accounting for literary depictions of emotion in earlier eras, see Lynch (2022). The past two decades has seen growing interest in the history of emotions, running parallel to work on affect theory but often uninfluenced by it. My own practice has been to draw on the insights of both emerging traditions, with a hope of bridging this gap, at least in a preliminary way.
4. In Massumi's influential formulation, "affect is intensity"; affect manifests as the force of encounter, and varies by degree of modulation, by increase or diminishment of intensity; affect is not knowable in itself, has no content, but is, rather, discernible by its effects; affect is not hinged to any narrative structure or function, and instead follows a logic of autonomy. By contrast, "An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action–reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized" (p. 88).
5. The editors of the *Affect Theory Reader* write that affect "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon"; and rather than be evident in its operations, "it is quite likely that affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest shuttling of intensities: all the miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed. The ordinary and its extra" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, pp. 1–2).
6. For a fuller account, see Ahern (2022, 2017).
7. That neuroscientific and cognitive perspectives in many ways operate in a world apart can be demonstrated by the fact that the entry on "Affect (philosophical perspectives)" in the authoritative *Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences* makes no mention of the Massumi–Deleuzean line of affect theory (Charland, 2009). It's true that the influence of Massumi's model was still building when this encyclopedic guide was published, but it would be a fair assumption to make that an updated version would still be silent on what has become a major

research tradition. Yet how far apart are these approaches at base, really? Kate Stanley (2017) makes a compelling case for how the thinking on emotions/affect of psychologist Tomkins, of neuroscientist Damasio, and of philosopher Massumi all share a major debt to William James, who himself was deeply influenced by Spinoza. The implications of these connections are profound and will need to be considered further.

8. See, for example, Hemmings (2005), Barnett (2008), Leys (2011), Vermeulen (2015), Ahern (2017).

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