

The Study of Affect and Romanticism

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Abstract

What follows is a review essay in two parts: the first, a consideration of the general problem affect poses for literary criticism and for romantic studies in particular; the second a review of some recent, outstanding work on affect and its significance to Romanticism. The problem of affect derives primarily from the difficulty of defining or locating affect and from its equivocal relationship to modern science – as both an object of scientific scrutiny and as an emblem of the pseudo- or even unscientific. The articles and books discussed in the second half of this review handle this problem in sophisticated and surprising ways, unlocking the critical possibilities available when we read affect with less skepticism and more self-reflection.

I.

Any survey of the recent upsurge in interest in affect has to begin on the slippery ground of the term itself. Indeed, its unsettled nature may explain part of the appeal of affect. In contemporary discussion, affect is often bundled with a cluster of related terms: feeling, mood, sense or sensation, emotion, and – acknowledging an intellectual debt to 18th-century moral philosophy – passion. Some scholars respond to this elusiveness by striving for a technical, almost clinical definition. Exemplary in this regard, and in its borrowings from cognitive scientists, Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* presents affect as an autonomic system, functioning alongside but independent of cognition and understood separately, as it were, by the body: by skin, pulse, sweat glands, neurological impulses, etc. Cognition (like the critic) may seize upon these autonomic responses, 'qualify' or name them, but in doing so it 'dampens' their force or 'resonance' (Massumi 25–6). Massumi clearly distinguishes affect from emotion: emotion is too easily named; it is affect 'owned and recognized'; it translates affect into 'conventional, consensual' form, where it can be given 'function and meaning' (Massumi 28). William Reddy supports this thought, quoting from psychologist Phoebe Ellsworth: 'The [emotional] process almost always begins before the name and almost always continues after it. The realization of the name [of the emotion] undoubtedly changes the feeling, simplifying and clarifying' (Reddy xii).¹ Hence the apparent mystique of affect: it 'is not ownable and recognizable and therefore resistant to critique' (Massumi 28). That resistance to critique, moreover, suggests why affect has replaced 'sentiment' in critical currency, the latter term perhaps worn out by years of ideological critique. Massumi's rigor, we might note, leads him to insist all the more on affect's resistance to naming, its pre- or extra-discursive nature.

Other scholars treat affect more loosely, its vagrant nature allowing it to be used opportunistically to cover a range of needs. A recent article on 'The Affective Revolution in 1790s Britain', for instance, opens with a relatively standard definition: 'the term "affective" conveys better than any other the combination of internal (emotional) state

and external (bodily) expression or disposition' (Hunt and Jacob 496). Here, affect mediates between emotion and expression, eliding the barriers between experience and representation. Of course such a definition only raises more vividly the question of location: how external are bodily expressions and dispositions? How internal are emotions? Where, in fact, do we find affect? In the end, Hunt and Jacob restrict and subordinate affect to sexuality: for them the 'search for affective styles' in the 1790s serves the 'history of sexuality broadly conceived' (497). Even under the heavy mantle of sexuality, though, affect moves – and moves restlessly. Identified as neither emotion nor its expression, and yet somehow essential to each, affect offers a principle of mobility and flux and crucially, as we will see in what follows, of mediation itself.

In contact with, but clearly migrating beyond the study of sexuality, affect allows its students to return to esthetics. As the study of feelings, sensations and their value and as the encounter with what *moves* us, esthetics may be newly understood apart from or prior to ideas and therefore apart from or prior to ideology. Treating affect as fully embodied yet 'more or less intensely interwoven in with cognitive processes', Eve Sedgwick comes closest to taking the study of affect as a way of re-grounding esthetic criticism (18). Her *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* is drawn to the claim, offered first by psychologist Sivan Tompkins, that the system of affect, unlike the Freudian system of drives, 'is not oriented toward a specific aim and end different from itself; affect is non-utilitarian, 'autotelic' with, as Tompkins puts it, 'a phenomenological quality which ... has intrinsic rewarding and punishing characteristics' (18–20). Within the scientific terminology we recognize the features of the esthetic: its non-purposiveness, its allotments of pleasure and pain. For Sedgwick, the study of affect – as a revised, material esthetics – provides a 'conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of means versus ends' (21). In this nearly utopian space affect moves, as Sedgwick repeatedly reminds us, 'more freely' (18–21, *passim*).

Despite its elusiveness and relative freedom, or perhaps in response to both of these characteristics, some of the most influential studies of affect in literary criticism seem determined to convert affect to a taxonomy of types.² Tompkins, the psychologist whose research on affect inspired Sedgwick's essays in *Touching Feeling*, scrupulously describes eight primary affects. Sedgwick herself reflects on them and their role in theories of reading: contempt disgust, enjoyment-joy, fear-terror, gratitude, interest-excitement, shame-humiliation, surprise-startle. The hyphenated terms suggest, again, how difficult it is to capture affect in words; they offer what Sedgwick admits is a 'nonce taxonomy' (145). In a similar spirit, Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings*, her groundbreaking examination of negative affect in works of American literature and film, celebrates the pleasures of such provisional taxonomic elaboration, identifying not only familiar affective states such as 'anxiety' and 'irritation', but introducing as well what she calls 'stuplimity'.³ Thomas Pfau prefers to consider 'mood' rather than affect, in part because the former term has greater weight in the German romantic tradition, but also because it moves more readily into the realm of inter-subjectivity. His excellent study, *Romantic Moods*, nevertheless upholds the taxonomic impulse associated with affect: its subtitle, *Paranoia, Trauma, Melancholy, 1790–1840* announces the subdivisions structuring the book (and its debt to psycho-social theories). None of these analyses, though, claims to have completed mapping the terrain of affect. None appears invested in what Massumi would call 'damping down' the resonance of affect, especially negative affect; rather, they aim to amplify it. Ngai's subtle delineation of 'stuplimity' seems in fact designed to register how certain modes of reading may release a potentially unlimited proliferation of affective states.

To appreciate the energy coursing through current studies of affect, not just in romantic studies but, as this brief list suggests, in literary study more generally, it is worth returning to a critical moment 60 years ago, when a single essay, 'The Affective Fallacy' responded to – and successfully strangled – an earlier critical enthusiasm for affect studies. William K. Wimsatt and Morton Beardsley's 1949 attack on affective criticism is a telling document for romantic studies especially, as it assumes a strong link between affect and romanticism, laying the blame for 'physiological and psychologically vague' 'emotive formulas' at the feet of a 'romantic reader psychology' enunciated in the early 19th century. The highly dispassionate – and never vague – formulas employed by Wimsatt and Beardsley announce their own rage for taxonomy, as if in subdividing affective criticism, in naming and re-naming it, they could effectively 'dampen down' its energies.

Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest what our own critical moment as well as the period of Romanticism seem to testify: that an increased interest in literary accounts of affect derives from or at least accompanies contemporary work by cognitive scientists, psychologists and moral philosophers. (The critics do not broach the question of why, in post-war United States, such a confluence might occur.) Though they do not cleanly distinguish between affect and emotion, as Massumi does, their essay delights in other fine discriminations: discriminating emotion itself from its effects or its objects or from the words that represent or express or suggest emotion; discriminating what a poem is from its causes or effects; and, at great length, discriminating various forms of affective criticism from one another. First, they delineate semantic from historical or anthropological considerations of affect; then they delineate this grouping – 'those who have coolly investigated what poetry has done to others' – from those who advocate an 'imaginative' form of affective criticism, who 'have testified what poetry has done to themselves' (41). Next, those who link affect to imagination are themselves neatly parked in the branching grid. There are the readers imaginatively 'swept away' by overpowering experiences of poetry and authorized, it seems, by their own sincerity. A step away from them are the (pseudo)-physiologists, who track poetry's effects through (an imagined) bodily response. In this space is found Edmund Burke, with his melting and relaxing response to beauty, alongside Emily Dickinson, with the top of her head blown off by a poem. An even 'more advanced form' of affective criticism – and here they hang Coleridge in his willing suspension of disbelief – privileges 'hallucination.' This last form is 'the least theoretical in detail, has the least content, and makes the least claim on critical intelligence'; it is, therefore, 'not a theory but a fiction or a fact – of no critical significance' (43).

As the list of forms expands and the types of fallaciousness intensify we glimpse the vexed urgency behind Wimsatt and Beardsley's discriminations ('affect' for them is safer as a noun than a verb). On the one hand, they chastise the 'vague', unsystematic or pseudo-scientific habits of their colleagues; on the other hand, they fear the intrusion of scientific methods into questions of esthetics and poetic 'value'. Here is their nightmare: the practitioner of a truly 'systematic affective criticism' – an awful, Frankenstein figure – will have to resort for evidence to the 'dreary and antiseptic laboratory' in order to test 'what kinds of colors are suggested by a line of Keats'. To contain this fear, they reduce affect to sexuality, and adolescent sexuality at that: affective criticism must resort to the laboratory to test color 'or to measure ... the minor discharges attendant upon reading [a line of Keats]'. The gap between 'physiological experience and the perception of value', Wimsatt and Beardsley add drily, 'remains wide' in or out of the laboratory. Like those minor discharges, they conclude, affective criticism has given birth to 'very little actual criticism' (44).

These old dismissals appear strangely predictive when read in the wake of more recent scholarship, especially studies of affect in Romanticism.⁴ Marjorie Levinson has instructed us quite precisely on the contestations of ‘value’ operative in the very discharge of adolescent affect in Keats’ poetry. Claudia Johnson has demonstrated the value of ‘equivocal beings’ and the vague and equivocal feelings they evoke. Celeste Langan, by insisting on the ‘objective forms’ favored by Wimsatt and Beardsley (rhyme, meter, but also the printed page), has taken quite seriously the ‘hallucinations’ generated by Walter Scott’s poetry and the media revolution they announce. Moreover Rei Terada, in *Feeling Theory: Emotion After the Death of the Subject*, her lucid account of the role of feeling in post-structuralist thought, has explained the rigorous, objective style of critical theory – Paul de Man’s but perhaps Wimsatt and Beardsley’s as well – as a ‘“felt” necessity’, a feeling response to the very experience of modernity.⁵ But then, as Terada reminds us, Keats had diagnosed this play years earlier: ‘The feel of not to feel it,/When there is none to heal it’.⁶ As intensely as any expression of feeling, then, the expression of not feeling – the ‘classic objectivity’ Wimsatt and Beardsley grant to ‘actual criticism’ – reveals the site of affect. Finally, Noel Jackson, in his outstanding *Science and Perception in Romantic Poetry* answers the questions that ‘The Affective Fallacy’ leaves hanging and does so by resorting to romantic forebears: why did matters of feeling and perception press so strongly on scientists, politicians and poets at this historical juncture and, more searchingly, what larger implications – and legacies – are entailed when we ask poetry to ‘make us feel?’

II.

By insisting on the difference between a truly objective criticism, and the wobbly subjective approaches associated with affect, Wimsatt and Beardsley could not anticipate what post-structuralism but also studies in cognitive psychology have since accomplished: the decoupling of affect and subject. Because of its location somehow inside and outside the individual body, scholars over the past 15 years have increasingly made visible how affect moves and thrives in a realm independent of individual subjectivity. Adela Pinch’s *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Feeling from Hume to Austen* examines the late 18th- and early 19th-century recognition of passion as a feeling operating between and among individuals, not emanating from some private interiorized zone but from forms of social and textual circulation. Julie Ellison follows a similar insight in *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion*, but with different aims. She traces from the beginning of the 18th century a culture of public display of (masculine) emotion which in turn creates an affective geography of race, empire and gender. Terada’s work neatly complements that of Pinch and Ellison, turning to post-structuralist theories to find evidence of the movement of affect occasioned by the so-called ‘death of the subject’. Pfau’s *Romantic Moods* continues this trend. Because of its independence from conceptual thought, feeling, especially as it designates a mood, ‘is intrinsically oriented toward social life and communal values and purposes’ (14). What Pfau designates as mood (*Stimmung* in the German Romantic tradition he mines), Lauren Berlant identifies as ‘affective atmosphere’ and affective atmospheres, she insists, ‘are shared’ (845).

If, then, affect studies offer a newly material and embodied site for consideration of esthetics, this release from the subject and the subjective gives affect a revisionary role as well in considerations of history. Affective atmospheres interest Berlant, for example, because tracking affect allows her to track ‘the body’s active presence to the intensities of the present’; for this reason, the scholarly pursuit of affect ‘can communicate the conditions of an historical moment’s production as a visceral moment’ (845–6). Affect offers a

different sort of knowledge, a 'kind of intelligence ... that works in the present' before history becomes codified, before the present moment gets dampened down into something past and less intensely embodied (649). Berlant is looking at contemporary novels, but understanding them in the tradition of historical novel-writing which arose in the early 19th century and which concentrated on 'making the past' – and by reflex the present – 'apprehensible as an affective experience' (847). No less forcefully, Thomas Pfau directs us to the historicity of affect in the lyric voice developed by romantic poetry. This voice 'mediates' the objective preservation of felt experience: the esthetic representation or 'simulacrum' of felt experience prolongs 'a holistic and overdetermined social knowledge' of its particular moment (15). For Pfau romantic literature does not simply grasp history-as-present, as James Chandler has shown in *England in 1819*; rather, romantic literature records the feeling (mostly anxious) of being historical:

It explores how feeling in the aggregate molds the emotional fabric of its subject – namely, as a persistent and unsettling "feeling" of the irreducible tenuousness and volatility of being, a quality to be mirrored in lyric and narrative forms whose interpretive complexity proves just as palpable and irreducible. (17)

In a sense, Pfau explains how the historical and theoretical conditions of the turn of the 19th century make possible Berlant's reading of contemporary American novels.

Given the romantic notion of literature as this flexible mediator, both Pfau and Berlant can approach affect or mood in its 'objective' forms, and still resist a certain idea of history as putting the past and past feelings to rest.⁷ Indeed, it becomes possible to read romantic poetry itself as an objective form or technology for both generating and making analyzable feeling *per se*. The revision of esthetics and history afforded by attention to the status of feeling is re-integrated with the discourse of science in Jackson's *Science and Perception in Romantic Poetry*. The mutual emergence and co-implication of romantic poetics and romantic-era science of the nervous system serve to anchor Jackson's analysis. His remarkable archival work and theoretical sophistication are marshaled around a series of organizing terms: suggestion, autonomy, common sense, and consent (or *consensus*). All these terms, Jackson shows convincingly, are implicated in the period understanding of what it is to feel and make feel. All of them receive complex treatment by the major poets, Wordsworth especially. And all, in that treatment, reveal what many previous readings of Romanticism have not seen or denied, but what is becoming increasingly apparent in the wake of Pinch's, Ellison's, and Pfau's work: the intractably social and material bases for romantic esthetics *and* the poets' deep awareness of this dependency. In several instances, Jackson has made it impossible for future critics to propose any longer the ascendancy of (poetic) self-consciousness or the assertion of an imperious imagination. In an exemplary reading of Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', Jackson treats the poem as a perceptual 'self-experiment' akin to those conducted by contemporary scientists such as Thomas Reid and Alexander Munro, and in fact conducted by Coleridge himself. In such experiments (often concerning visual perception, and often conducted with books as props), 'common sense' or the assumed mode of viewing had to be interrupted or blocked, so that the grounds of perception could be discerned, and a more certain 'common sense' or perception reveal itself. With 'Frost at Midnight', Jackson shows how Coleridge has to erase the social world (and all its 'numberless goings-on') not to offer primacy to the individual consciousness (the 'I' of the poem) but rather to show in this de-familiarized setting how in fact 'community is the very medium of self-consciousness ... a constitutive outside that structures *perception*' – others might add *affect* – 'imperceptibly from within' (124–5; emphasis added). It is a stunning reading,

insisting in persuasive and searching ways on a reconsideration of that basic unit of the romantic lyric, the autonomous 'I'. Just as he re-introduces the structure of consensus into the supposed autonomy of the poetic subject, so too does Jackson re-discovers the 'sense of history' within romantic esthetics, rescuing it from charges of ahistoricism and ideological bad faith. He repositions the 'culture of feeling' within a view of scientific 'abstraction' that appears more vexed and unsettled than we knew. In giving the science of feeling a history, Jackson nonetheless returns feeling to the arena Massumi wanted to leave behind, that of 'conventional, consensual' form, which locks feeling into 'function and meaning'.

When Jackson finds in Coleridge's meditations on feeling and perception that the poet's isolated consciousness is 'not truly his at all', he borrows from a slightly earlier revisionary study of affect in Romanticism, Kevis Goodman's *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History*. The centerpiece of Goodman's dazzling book, which Jackson echoes closely, is her reading of William Cowper's 'A Winter's Evening', the poem from which Coleridge himself borrowed in writing 'Frost at Midnight'. In a captivating reading of Cowper's famous 'brown study', Goodman reveals how the lapse of thought which Cowper constructs there opens the poet's secluded parlor – and mind – to a world of strangers and strange, inarticulable feeling. Goodman shows how Cowper himself is concerned with mediation in this passage, where he compares the work of his poem with the work of the newspaper, developing in his lines a sophisticated 'medium' for the transmission of such worldly affect. Her book offers a radically new history of the georgic mode in the long 18th century, itself a daunting task in a period which gave birth, in Anthony Low's term, to a 'georgic revolution' in science, agriculture, literature, and political theory. Goodman uses the georgic to suggest a new sort of historiography, one that departs from skepticism and depends on the registration of affect. In her very convincing argument, the georgic allows an intense focus on the question of mediums and mediation. (The georgic was Virgil's *via media*, invested in the *techné* of verse, and Goodman inserts this understanding of mediation within a history that runs from Aristotle to McLuhan to current media theory). At the same time, georgic mediation works with matters which are both less and more than Lockean 'ideas' and thus both prior to and in excess of ideology. For Goodman, as for other writers in this review, these are primarily affective matters: agitation, discomfort, or pain are transmitted (Pfau might say prolonged) over distances of space and time. Poetry invested in the georgic mode – and she turns to perhaps the most widely read poems of the 18th century – obsessively tests its mediating power, and Goodman finds that even when it aims to narrate or otherwise contain history, something else, this affective residue, will out. Her task is to identify and elaborate these moments of affective excess as records of an otherwise unknowable history. Needless to say, this approach profoundly revises much of the most influential scholarship in Romanticism of the last 25 years. Her concerns – the history of form, the form and transmission of affect, the 'work' and ethical value of the literary – are emerging as the central questions of literary criticism in the wake of the New Historicism.

In both Jackson and Goodman's case, the book title does not do justice to the extraordinary richness of the project; both make crucial contributions to our understanding of affect and the literary. Both rely on daunting inter-disciplinary research, integrating the work of science and poetry in order to rethink the role of esthetics and historical understanding (Jackson relies primarily on the sensation science of the later century, Goodman on the immediate and more lingering effects of scientific enlightenment in the 18th century). Goodman's is perhaps more literary in its sensibilities, and

more interested in formal matters, especially the figuration of mediation; her debts are to Walter Benjamin and Raymond Williams. Jackson's book, with its affiliations to Hegel and Kant, has a sharper analytic edge and ranges well past the Romantic period into Victorian and Modernist esthetics. What perhaps separates the two most is method and style: in Jackson's case they show the synthetic powers which accompany a greater faith in cognition (and consensus); in Goodman's (as in Sedgwick's or occasionally Pfau's) they display a deflection or suspension of cognition in an effort to sustain fully the force of affect and its implications. Which is not to say that Goodman does not know an extraordinary amount – she emphatically does – but that she has developed a more distinctive, questioning mode that works through seemingly indirect byways – like affect itself (her chapter on Wordsworth is most revelatory of this mode). More than any of the other works surveyed here, Goodman's work links together all the major concerns we have seen in this survey of affect studies, but stands out in its deliberate treatment of affect with mediation, and finally, in demonstrating how, through its affective charge, poetry mediates and bears witness to history. Goodman locates the moments when the irruption of affect registers the 'history of the present' as pained, anxious, resistant to knowledge and unsure, as Keats would have it, of 'healing'. As subsequent studies already indicate, this is the work of affect studies for our own present.

Short Biography

Mary A. Favret is a member of the English Department at Indiana University, Bloomington, where she teaches primarily British, but also American 18th- and 19th-century literature. She is the co-editor of *At the Limits of Romanticism* (Indiana University Press, 1994) and the author of *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). She has recently completed *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming), which deals in part with questions of affect and history.

Notes

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¹ William M. Reddy's *The Navigation of Feeling* is an invaluable, expansive book, bringing cognitive, ethnographic and literary-historical approaches into a general analytic framework. He concentrates explicitly on the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and especially on transformations in the cult of sensibility. His focus remains on the side of identifiable emotion, and not affect, though he occasionally gestures to this larger realm.

² I am grateful to Jonathan Elmer for this insight and for sharing with me his own work on affect.

³ Ngai's precise discussion of tone is especially valuable, as tone's elusiveness and centrality to literary effect are so closely related to affect.

⁴ Affect studies have a particular intensity for romanticists, as this survey hopes to show, but important work is also being pursued in other fields. See in particular the special issue on affect and emotion edited by Rachel Abelow in *Victorian Studies* 50.3 (Spring 2008).

⁵ The phrase '“felt” necessity' comes from David Wagenknecht's excellent review of Terada's book, in *Romanticism* 43.4 (Winter 2004): 661.

⁶ John Keats, 'Dear-Nighted December'.

⁷ Pfau argues explicitly against the value of expression or expressiveness in getting at the feeling or 'mood' of a literary text, thus bypassing many of Wimsatt and Beardsley's complaints (17).

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