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Confronting Affect Studies in the Age of Reason

Reading Massumi's theoretical essay produced in me what I can only describe as "affect" in something like Massumi's sense of the term: a hot, slightly irritated, slightly excited intensity, marked by a whirring of the head and a tightening of the chest. I could surely attribute this sensation to other things going on simultaneously in my life and in my body during the past week, when I was reading and processing the article: the fast approach of midterms; a faculty meeting (always an occasion for "intensity"); a brief illness, accompanied by nausea; a visit from my aging parents. But I am almost certain that these pre-existing "intensities," such as they are, have been heightened and given palpable form by grappling with Massumi's article. It irritated me to think of that melting snowman, sitting alone in the forest while scientific researchers exploited school children's frightened reactions to his story, or that hollow image of Reagan gesticulating and spouting contentless ideologies, holding the American electorate captive with the timber of his voice. Massumi's penchant for abstraction and paradox only enhanced the sensation.

I say that this sensation seemed something like "affect" in Massumi's sense of the term, and yet I suspect that he would resist the idea that affect emerges in the body according to the process that I have envisioned. For Massumi, true "intensity" happens only where there is a kind of crossing of the semantic wires, such that there is no predictable correspondence between stimulant and response. As he puts it, "the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way" (24). For Massumi, although this intensity can be measured by scientific instruments, it is perhaps not even fully perceptible to human cognition in the moment of the experience, for cognition inevitably attempts to ascribe a more logical narrative to the event than it truly exhibited in the moment. According to my own, more conventional perception of my own mental and physiological response, a degree of self-monitoring is still possible, even without fancy scientific instruments. My "intensity," even if it looked to me more like edgy, postmodern angst than time-honored emotion, occurred in a basically coherent reflection of the literary objects that provoked it. That is, my anxious, alienated feeling stemmed from both my concerned, empathetic response to anxious, alienated figures (the snowman and children) and my annoyed contemplation of a philosopher's overly anxious, alienated interpretation (i.e., Massumi's perverse assumption that the timbre of a man's voice—Reagan's or anyone else's—contains no emotional or cognitive meaning). My emotional-affective response to Massumi's essay, as I perceived it, was from start to finished conditioned by intrusions of intellect and culture. I moralized about the ethics of the snowman experiment; I moralized about Massumi's disrespectful interpretation of Ronald Reagan's appeal to senior citizens. In both cases, this moralizing (as I understood it) was not only the predictable product of my "intensity" of response, but also the precondition for my irritation or "intensity." If my feeling of anxious alienation can be said to have heightened, or have been

heightened by, a random conjunction with life events provoking similar autonomic responses, there is still a certain coherence, purposefulness, and predictability in the affective-emotional narrative that I ascribe to the experience. Massumi's zombie-like examples—the snowman and that puppet politician—haunt my thoughts like electrified automotons, their bodies moving apart from any conscious will, simultaneously acting within and acted upon by their environment or their position in the national media.

In short, it was challenging to wrap my mind around Massumi's "assignifying philosophy of affect" even as a concept (27). As I tried to articulate his ideas for myself, I kept slipping back into the neo-Aristotelian ways of thinking about literary effect, affect, and emotion that were typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which literary forms produce predictable emotional effects in normative audiences. As an intellectual historian committed to understanding how education can shape the development and experience of sentiment, it was hard to embrace a model of human affective response in which the body is just a bundle of nerves. As an empiricist, it was hard to take seriously a conception of human response that misconstrues the scientific studies upon which it purports to be based, and which in its central philosophical descriptions of affect remains, in Ruth Ley's terms, "in the grip of a false picture of how the mind relates to the body" (456).

That said, I suspect that affect studies in its broader, looser formulation—as imagined in particular by Mary Favret—has a great deal to teach scholars of the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century is often spoken of as the "Age of Reason," a label that honors Enlightenment arguments for relying on experimental methods and an impartial gaze to slough off prejudice, superstition, and unreflective religious faith. But the period was actually full of very interesting, compelling theorizations of emotion and affect, well beyond Spinoza; and its writers imagined literature sustaining much stronger, more predictable emotional connections to readers than twentieth-century critical trends tended to admit. Perhaps affect studies can lead us to a fuller appreciation of these often neglected aspects of eighteenth-century literary production and culture.