

Intellectual Love and the Affective Turn

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This talk is based on my book *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in British Romantic Poetry and Poetics* (currently under review). The book is grounded in a simple observation: Romantic poets use “love” in their writings far more often than “nature” and “imagination,” yet this remains unacknowledged in Romantic scholarship. One reason for this situation is the imprecise and often idealized meaning of love, which makes it more convenient to dismiss love as sentimental or as an ideological smokescreen rather than to take it seriously. An earlier tradition of criticism cast Romantic love as a predominantly “unifying and cohesive force,” and that notion of idealized love has proven powerfully persuasive. In his seminal 1971 study of Romantic love, Frederick Beaty argued that the Romantics sought reconciliation of the earthly and spiritual through love; love, in other words, *is* transcendence. Historians similarly locate in the Romantic period a revival what Denis de Rougemont calls paganism’s “mystical union” of divine love, effectually spiritualizing the erotic. Jerome McGann and subsequent new historicists would later critique this characterization of love as part of the Romantic Ideology: since the 1980s, scholars generally link love to Romantic imagination and aesthetics as attempts to transcend politics and escape the material world. However, as the rise of affect studies and the field of literature and science suggests, we need to take a second look at emotions, including love, in Romantic literature.

The “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences allows *Amorous Aesthetics* to take up this challenge by recovering the tradition of intellectual love in Romantic poetry and poetics. As we move beyond resistance to “emotional readings” made suspicious by the “affective fallacy,” as well as the hermeneutics of suspicion championed by new historicism, we can see the notion of Romantic love anew. As I demonstrate in the book, Romantic love, and intellectual love in particular, was interwoven with the scientific and philosophical discourses of the period. Poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, John Clare, Felicia Hemans, Alfred Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold collectively develop a tradition of intellectual love steeped in the interconnectedness of thought and feeling, at the levels of the personal, the political, the scientific, and the ecological. In contrast to studies that tend to see love and other major Romantic concepts as ideological illusions into which poets retreat from the material realities of their time, this book demonstrates how seemingly inward-turning and escapist moves are also outward-turning engagements with the social world. As with the concepts of nature and imagination, the transcendence and idealism often tied to Romantic intellectual love remains grounded in sociality, science, and critical thought.

In the talk, I will provide an overview of my main argument regarding intellectual love in Romanticism; discuss the importance of Baruch Spinoza’s theory of the affects on the Romantics and on contemporary affect theory; and provide a detailed example of my approach using Wordsworth and affective neuroscience. In contrast to theorists like Massumi, I show that affect is neither a solely biological phenomenon nor a solely ideological one; following the tradition of intellectual love espoused by Spinoza, Wordsworth believed that affect could be recognized, regulated, and put to poetic as well as political use.