

Brett Fish

18 September 2016

### On Massumi and Literature

Of the three articles, Massumi's was the most enlightening, though simultaneously pretentious. There doesn't seem to be a place for affect theory (as Massumi defines it) to fit in with literary studies. Neuroscientists study the physical stimuli of human beings and philosophers interpret the findings. What's left for social scientists and humanities beyond that? It seems like the science is over Massumi's head. However, Massumi may have inadvertently provided a new lens for looking at literature (much like Freud).

I'll try a thought experiment. Suzanne looks up to the stars. There's an entire universe out there... She then feels insignificant. She looks back down to the ground and frowns, feeling sad about her place in the universe. Was she sad before the frown, or was the sadness a reaction to the frown? What about the neurological processes that led to Suzanne looking up or the scientific knowledge about the universe that creates the insignificant feeling? More specifically, is Suzanne *conscious* of her body's decision to frown? Massumi quotes Benjamin Libet when tasked to explain this dilemma: "we may exert free will not by initiating intentions but by vetoing, acceding, or otherwise responding to them after they arise" (29). Massumi follows up this quotation with a word salad of undefined jargon. Leys brings up a counter position to the findings quoted by Massumi, though they don't work with my above thought experiment. Massumi quotes a study where volunteers know what they are going to have to do, are asked to do it, and studied afterwards for all kinds of bodily responses. But what about the seemingly random decision to look up at the stars by Suzanne?

This leaves me to wonder if Massumi is a naturalist or not, and whether this extends to being a determinist (it almost certainly does). Massumi does attempt to answer this by referring to the indeterministic nature of quantum physics. Quantum physics has shown that certain elements of the natural world cannot be known or measured, thus leaving the door open for a consciousness separate from the material body. Leys appeals to something similar to this objection when countering Massumi. Leys' critique that Massumi is actually 'cheating' by thinking in a dualist way while asserting naturalist claims is spot on. There can be no 'free will' in a true sense without some form of consciousness.

To apply this in literature will require something similar to Massumi's final argument. He uses 'affect' to show why Reagan claimed the white house. This appeal to emotion determined the affected people's actions. To run another thought experiment: Would Massumi claim that affect has led to the popular rise of Donald Trump? Did the people who felt strong, positive emotions to his message have free choice in choosing to vote for him? Even if, per se, a Trump supporter decided last minute to vote for Hillary... what caused the last second change? If it can be determined, then it probably was determined. It seems hard for Massumi to take Libet's stance on "vetoing for free will" as a naturalist.

To conclude, Massumi's dysfunctional brand of 'affect' may be useful for studying characters in literature (particularly fantasy) who feel (and act) out of their own control.

