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The Living and Dead Authors and Readers

Since the writing of my Master's thesis,¹ and probably long before, I have struggled with the idea of the intentional fallacy,² along with Formalism in its different iterations. While I see the necessity of Formalism in the classroom, I find the text to be an insufficient resource for meaning, as far as my own work is concerned.³ The outside always influences the inside. This is true of texts and true of emotions. Most of us come to literature with a deep love for an author or some feeling for a certain work. I mourn Barthes' murder of the author still,⁴ and I had some grand expectation for affect theory to resurrect her from the grave.

Massumi disappointed my expectations; however, he did deliver some much needed context. I do appreciate the way he defines and thus, separates affect from emotion. Emotion a "subjective" construct and through experience renders affect into something "personal" (Massumi 28). Emotion is more interesting to me than pure affect, for I see it as immensely useful to examine how culture shifts our cognitive responses to physiological ones. Massumi also succeeds in creating a vocabulary for an emergent field where none existed prior; at least this is his own claim (27). We end up with terms, such as: intensity, virtual, potential, emergence, suspense, expectation, etc. He uses derridian techniques to unlock signifiers from past signifieds to create a new theoretical jargon. Instead of moving to a post-post-structuralist moment, Massumi appears to operate within the constraints of post-structuralism.⁵ This is not by itself a failing, only a failing of truly creating something new, of giving language back its meaning.

Massumi's empiricism is problematic. His scientific methods do not hold up under close scrutiny. His use of anecdotes suggest that facts are absent, or at least, unsatisfactory to his explain his project. I do understand that anecdotes are often used in psychology, but these anecdotes are often accompanied by compilations of data. One example is that the snowman experiment had no discernible control group. How do we know that this group of unnumbered children is not anomalous? What do anomalies mean, if anything, to this type of research? Do children react to this situation or others the same way that adults react? Do we need to know this? The Reagan anecdote⁶ has as many flaws. Again, was there a control group and what did they experience? Are there no other influences besides affect witnessed during this one speech to cause Reagan's political success? Thus, can we truly broil this down to his means being affective? Is one speech, one instance, and two sets of hospital patients enough to characterize an

¹ Affect theory is new ground for me; so most likely, my response will be more questions than answers. As a first year doctoral student, the most important thing that I have learned is that I know nothing. I will endeavor to find a space in this criticism, and perhaps, I will minimally succeed.

² Another Wimsatt and Beardsley text that most of you are probably familiar with, but I will note here anyway.

³ This is most likely because of my historicist leanings.

⁴ Barthes says, "literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (2).

⁵ This is assertion could quite possibly be my inexperience in the area speaking.

⁶ I am referring to these as anecdotes, because Massumi refers to them as stories and not research.

entire presidency? While Massumi uses the stories effectively to promote his viewpoint, do they really point to a real way to study affect for a gain in truth? For me, his lack of attention to true scientific methodology ruined the appearance of a hard line scientific study.

This leads me back to the death of the author and to Favret's article. I found this article useful to see turns in affect study and movements within the field. Favret does miss the opportunity to point to Wimsatt's and Beardsley's intentions in writing "The Affective Fallacy." While they used "The Intentional Fallacy" to seal the tomb in which Barthes buried the author, the pair uses this article to kill the reader and all in the name of Formalism. Their fear of the laboratory appears to have less to do with scientific study and more to do with criticism's need to stroll further from the text. Their flag is planted strongly in the text; therefore, they must defend its sacred ground. Despite my objections to the pair's many assertions, they do have one valid point. Will our literary criticism begin to include charts and tables with measurements of readers' physiological states as proof? Since that has not been the case, I think not. Everyone was also afraid that Derrida had ripped morality right out of the world, but this fear was unsubstantiated as well. But I do understand the fear of turning literature into a biological experiment when language should be at its core. My author remains buried for the moment; however, the reader has managed to claw from the grave and into a zombie-like existence. Affect theory gives readers autonomous reactions, verifiable by science, but still limits their ability to feel. In the future, I do see a time when criticism will reconcile language with meaning and with emotion. At least, I hope that moment is coming, for I can see that affect theory has launched us into new territory.

As far as my own work, I can see the usefulness of affect theory and the ability for it to construct meaning in situations where the use of language is unreadable. My work on rape, specifically in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, would have profited from a foray into this field. Rape and consent are not always linguistically readable. Fanny reacts in ways not consistent with expectations in scenes of forced sexual encounters. Fanny lies "passive and innocent of the least sensation of pleasure," instead of fighting off her attackers (60). Does non-consent lie in cognitive or physiological realms? I am interested to learn more about those critics working in the less stringently scientific areas of affect theory, and I want to learn more about affect theory and gender. Affect theory could help unlock or un-complicate these perceived moments of gender inequality and force. I end with these questions: How could the eighteenth-century benefit from reading affect? How can affect shape the way consent and rape are understood in the period? And what does a practical application of these theories in literature studies actually look like?

Works Cited

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