Nothing More Than Feelings?: Affect Theory Reads the Age of Sensibility

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> At any moment hundreds, perhaps thousands of stimuli impinge upon the human body and the body responds by infolding them all at once and registering them as an intensity. Affect is this intensity.
>
> —Eric Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect"[1]

Scholars in a range of disciplines have turned of late to the study of affect as a way to better understand human agency. But "what are affects good for?," asks sociologist Patricia Clough in a recent meditation on the future of affect studies.[2] The question might be well put by the literary critic, reconceived along these lines: "how might affect theory help our understanding of literature, particularly the literature of sensibility in the eighteenth century?" I take up this question here on a number of fronts, noting similarities in the preoccupations of affect theorists and writers of the Age of Sensibility, as I consider the usefulness of affect theory for the literary critic and the consequences of adopting the underlying assumptions of affect studies as a guide for critical practice. My hope is that affect theory might help us better grasp what's at stake in texts that focus attention on the tremulations of affected bodies. But my investigation raises questions about the potential limits both to the explanatory power and the political efficacy of recent theories of affect. For as readers of cultural artifacts or of social practices, we are beckoned to articulate a more complete phenomenology of the aesthetic and of lived experience, but I'm concerned that such a focus may vacate potentials for political agency beyond mere celebration of immediate (unmediated) affective engagement, and so in the end reinforce rather than interrogate a metaphysics of presence that both the writer of sensibility 200 years ago and the affect theorist now would seem to embrace.

Before considering the relevance of affect theory to eighteenth-century studies, first a few general observations about the relation of the methods of affect studies to literary analysis. In recent investigations, social scientists have been

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able to observe bodies in motion—walking in public space, writhing in the dance hall—and to measure in a lab things like the connection between facial expression and the experience of fear or surprise, or the physiological response of children to an emotionally engaging film.[3] For those of us who study human activity in earlier periods, though, all we have are *representations* of the quickenings of affect, the only traces left of long dead people. (And for disciplines such as literary studies and art history, such representations are what we're interested in primarily, anyway.) Even if we could determine the responses of actual readers or viewers of works of art, would we want to? Ruth Leys points out that a certain strain of affect theory privileges as the measure of a work's success the quality of a reader's affective response to it, rather than the quality of craftsmanship—and so commits the "affective fallacy" that literary critics since W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley have sought to avoid.[4] It's as if the degree of autonomic arousal in the reader is sole measure of merit, which makes sense if "intensities" of experience of the kind celebrated in the epigraph above is what seems most important.

I find it hard to respond to such moves without a reflex of aversion, to a rhetoric that would seem to obliterate the grounds for shared interpretation and reduce the category of the aesthetic to its lowest denominator, less common than idiosyncratic: the fleeting perceptions of the individual. But I wonder increasingly whether factoring in affective response might be a way to bring back into literary criticism the felt pleasure of the text, which draws readers to literature in the first place—and is certainly what community members in extension courses want to talk about, before the instructor lets them know this is seen as out of bounds, as naïve and unsophisticated, and probably politically suspect, in that they want to leap from their own particular response to a universalizing account of what "the Reader" feels. It's not much to base a literary analysis on, not when the object of study since the New Critics has been the text itself—its structures and meanings—and more recently that text in dialogue with its contexts, its replication of or resistance to ideological forces as revealed in the critic's laying bare of the text's discursive coding. But what if we came to these texts with an attitude of openness to their promise of affective connection-making? Rather than be driven in our critical practice by a stance of suspicion that entails a narrowing of horizons, in that it scans for signs of complicity, repression, false consciousness, and so always knows in advance what it will find, what if we came to these texts on their own terms, in a way? Perhaps we might then live up to the spirit of Eve Sedgwick's call for a "reparative" mode of critique that could move us past the habit of "paranoid reading" she sees as endemic to academic culture. Rather than searching to uncover what is lurking *beneath*—or call for action *beyond*—the text, we might instead focus on the *beside*, on those interstices between being and action, feeling and judgment when the relational positioning of bodies and recognition of their interdependence is all that matters.[5] Could we read, for instance, scenes of teary-eyed reconcilia-

tion in the sentimental novel in a straight-up fashion, as opening a space for authentic, potentially revolutionary new assemblages of the kind envisioned by Gilles Deleuze,[6] rather than as always already co-opted by the power dynamics that determine social relations? I'll come back to this question, and this case study of the sentimental, to see whether conceptualizations of affect inspired by Sedgwick's thinking could move us beyond statements of desire for a healthier critical practice that are more than merely aspirational.

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So how to assess the relevance of affect theory to study of the eighteenth century? I would argue in the first instance for the necessity of eighteenth-century studies to affect studies now, especially given the rather blinkered concern with the present that tends to mark the field. Though we can say an interest in affect has characterized studies of contemporary culture over the last fifteen years or so, in eighteenth-century studies thinking about the cultural significance of the triad *passion / feeling / emotion* has been ongoing for decades, as the object of study demanded attention to these phenomena from the start, given that from mid-century onwards polite society throughout Europe and the Anglo-Atlantic world was preoccupied with feeling. The terms *sentiment*, *sentimental*, and *sensibility* pervade all genres of writing—from works of imaginative literature to the more prosaic, such as the personal diary, the periodical essay, the philosophical treatise, the political speech. It's important to note that the intellectual milieu of the Enlightenment has specific relevance for affect theory since Deleuze (and the many he has influenced) relies heavily on Baruch Spinoza, the early modern thinker whose work informs contemporary understandings of affect and who continues to be a foundational figure.[7] And orienting our thinking about affect in the period that saw the emergence of modernity can reveal much not just on account of Spinoza, but because of the contexts in which he was embedded.

First, a notion of "the passions" rather than of "emotions" was still dominant in the picture of what it means to be human;[8] this entailed in the first instance a conception of *being acted upon* rather than operating actively when it comes to the drivers of motive and behavior. Such a model of embodied being complicates the picture of the individual as autonomous and self-determining that has long been seen as a legacy of the Enlightenment. I would note more generally that tracing the connections of recent affect theory to this earlier period is productive due to the empiricist thinking that from the mid-seventeenth century gave rise to new interest in the physiological bases of perception, the mechanics of cognition, the workings of consciousness. The raw data of experience in all forms was taken as fit object of study when accounting for human subjectivity. Keeping in mind the spirit of such inquiry at the microlevels of perception offers us, perhaps, a way to heed Sedgwick's suggestion that we pay more attention to the texture of felt experience, to factor in the significance

of what is often left out in theories of rational action or in the deterministic accounts of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault: those shimmerings of feeling sparked by the volatile, always modulating nature of being-in-the-world.[9]

The model that emerged from the empiricist project promoted by John Locke, David Hume, and others is, of course, that all knowledge is founded in corporeal stimulus, originating from sense impressions transported by the nerves to the brain, and assembled into ideas that in turn come to generate the systems of belief and sense of personal identity we hold over time. It's remarkable how this way of thinking quickly came to govern how people—at least those in the republic of letters—thought about themselves and their relation to their environment, and how this pervades thinking about body and non-body, inside and outside, self and other. (So influential was this model of sensation psychology that G. J. Barker-Benfield has termed it "a new psychoperceptual paradigm."[10]) As testimony we have the notebooks of a young Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, famous in intellectual history as founder of the "moral sense" school in British philosophy. Reflecting on his life so far, Shaftesbury provides a compelling account of the vagaries of embodied subjectivity, upbraiding himself as follows:

> Thou hast engag'd, still sallyed out, & liv'd abroad, still prostituted thy self & committed thy Mind to Chance & the next comer, so as to be Treated at pleasure by every-one, to receive impressions from every thing and Machine-like to be mov'd & wrought upon, wound up, & governed exteriorly, as if there were nothing that rul'd within, or had the least control.[11]

What's striking about this passage is, first, how clearly what he's describing are the workings of affect, with its core quality of being acted upon, and its power to connect body and mind to an external environment that shapes the perceiving subject. Second, the intensities described here are not cause for celebration, but generate a kind of existential disorientation that results from a feeling of lack of control over self. Like many of his contemporaries, Shaftesbury betrays anxiety about materialism, the doctrine that we are no more than the sum of the physiological processes of the feeling body. Shaftesbury's use of the descriptor "Machine-like" is telling, and anticipates the central trope of Julien Offray de La Mettrie's 1748 treatise *L'homme machine*, perhaps the most radical—and certainly most notorious—empiricist manifesto, one whose bleak picture of a self determined wholly by mechanical operations forms a marked contrast to the celebratory tenor of some postmodernist explorations of the intersections of biology and technology.

One of the more influential current affect theorists, Sarah Ahmed, tracks a key notion concerning the transmission of affect—that it can spread like a disease—through the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, all the way back to Hume. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Hume contends

that in the presence of affected bodies, "others enter into the same Humour, and catch the Sentiment, by a Contagion or natural Sympathy."[12] Hume may be building here a case for a moral sense hardwired into the human makeup, but we are left with a picture of the self as permeable and easily influenced by the affective intensities that move through it. Then as now anxieties circulated about the matter of life: what *matters* if all is only matter? To counter the deterministic drift of seventeenth-century mechanism, vitalist thinkers in the eighteenth century and into the Romantic period posit a ghost at work in the machine.[13] More recent neo-vitalists share a belief in the more-than-matter immanence of the stuff of life. In the model of "transcendental empiricism" proposed by Deleuze, for instance, subject-object relations escape the mechanistic in the realm of the virtual, as phenomena combine into assemblages that avoid the tyranny of stasis in their always-present promise of becoming.[14]

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So we can see the relevance to the underpinnings of affect theory of thinking in the period that saw the emergence of modernity. But what use could such theory be to the literary critic, one concerned to investigate the aesthetic features and political implications of the literature of sensibility in the eighteenth century? Affect theorists now and writers immersed in the culture of sensibility then share a preoccupation with the workings of affect, with a quality of experience that is intense yet registers below the threshold of cognition. Affect theorists have developed a sophisticated vocabulary for accounting for the contingent, perplexing nature of embodied being. This project offers a promising interpretive frame for reading the scenes of affective excess that populate literary and visual works in the eighteenth century, when across Europe there comes to dominate a sentimental representational mode that assumes that heightened affect is significant in itself.[15] Works governed by this mode take as their main interest moments of high pathos, moments that punctuate fictional and non-fictional narratives alike and often provide the subject matter of paintings or of illustrations of novels and histories.[16] They share an interest in portraying bodies in the grip of passions with an insistence as if getting at an underlying truth about the human condition revealed *in extremis*. These works deploy a grammar of bodies positioned in space, triangulated in a relation of interdependence typically determined by an imbalance of power, with an observer sitting in judgment while wild-eyed supplicants kneel, or watching from the comfort of distance while victims of cruel fate stand paralyzed in a state of distress or lie prostrate in a swoon. Development of this iconography owes much to the French painter Charles Le Brun, who in the previous century painted heroic *tableaux* of bodies frozen in attitudes of overwhelmed pathos, and who in his influential lectures identified a number of passions universal to the human form manifested in fixed facial expressions.[17]

It is telling to note that the project of identifying a set of basic emotions man-

ifested on the body has been revived by psychologists influential on current theories of affect, especially Silvan Tomkins and Paul Ekman.[18] Other theorists, inspired by Deleuzean "non-representational" thinking, seek to account for phenomena that cannot be captured in or contained by language, by mediation, often asserting a truth of the body that precedes self-reflection, an authenticity that resists the fall into discourse.[19] These lines of thought may perhaps have the explanatory force to move us beyond the social constructionist paradigm that has governed humanities and social sciences research over the past few decades. But even if we don't right now pursue the broader implications of this re-visioning, it can at least provide a framework for investigating the preoccupation with affective intensities in early modern cultural productions. An important insight concerns the operations of affect, characterized less by the interplay of discrete subjectivities than by the modulations of a "field of forces." Hence the claim by Brian Massumi and others that affect is autonomous (even "pre-personal") and that such modulations can be analyzed in a dynamic system that includes affectual relations among human, animal, and even inorganic actants.

We might use such intuitions to better account for depictions of human behavior in the eighteenth century, when writers and artists are engaged in a shared project of sentimental representation that is remarkably widespread in terms of geography and genre and consistent in terms of formal element. They draw on a common storehouse of techniques to body forth portrayals of immediate hot passion in the cold media available to them: black ink, wet oils, hard stylus. It's as if collectively they are trying to grab hold of a truth about connections forged among feeling bodies that is always elusive, because diffuse, inchoate, always-becoming, more the circulation of affective forces than something that can be attributed to individual agency or even articulated in words (this is the "non-representational" quality of affect in action). Narratives of sensibility, of the sensible body, are driven by an overarching imperative: to get at something profound but not quite reachable—hence the need to repeat, to rehearse as if obsessively, and without resolution, scenes of affective agitation. David Marshall has rightly called these moments of excess the "primal scene" of sentimental fiction.[20]

Such moments of affective agitation focus in on the face-to-face encounter with alterity, when there is clearly much at stake, so much so that the conditions of possibility exceed those of the everyday, and generate a dramatic situation that breaks free from the tethers of a standard representational mode. Yet the scene remains embedded in a narrative context, in which the roles of the various figures in relation to one another are clear. My specific interest is in such moments represented in literary fiction, when the onward push of plotting slows down, and description becomes thick and preoccupied with capturing the gestures and tremulations of the affected body. A metaphysics of transcendence is

in play as individuals are left "beside themselves," are "transported" as they undergo a surfeit of emotion, whether of pity when confronted by a scene of virtue in distress, or, participating in a scene of reconciliation, of the joy that comes with the withdrawal of pain and the reassertion of communal harmony. In this space of the beside, there is a queering of normative convention that holds out the promise for new arrangements of the psychic and the social.

To mention one of many novels governed by this mode, Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) is punctuated by episodes during which the protagonist and his interlocutors, struck dumb by an overload of sensory input, consistently "fix" one another in an exchange of penetrating gazes that would seem to pierce through the isolation of the self to give those present access to a fuller state of being. When, for example, Harley and his servant Edwards return to the man's humble cottage, they discover that Harley's beloved Miss Walton has brought the man's grandchildren new clothes. In response to this act of generosity, they enact together a *tableau vivant* of sentimental communion:

> The boy heard his grandfather's voice, and, with that silent joy which his present finery inspired, ran to the door to meet him: putting one hand in his, with the other pointing to his sister, "See, said he, what Miss Walton has brought us?"——Edwards gazed on them. Harley fixed his eyes on Miss Walton; hers were turned to the ground;—in Edwards' was a beamy moisture.—He folded his hands together——"I cannot speak, young lady, said he, to thank you." Neither could Harley.[21]

I have written elsewhere of such moments, arguing that they share a representational mode that connects amatory, sentimental, and gothic fiction across a period of over a hundred years in the emergence of the early novel.[22] But my reading of such scenes occurred before the coalescence of affect theory into lines of thought or affect studies into a set of methods coherent enough to consider, and I wonder how useful it might be to consider such moments through the lens of current accounts of the circulation of affect. Perhaps affect theory can provide a frame of reference for grasping what's at stake in these contingent encounters between self and other, which hinge on a realization that the affected self is part of a larger whole, and seem to offer a kind of therapeutic corrective to the alienation of modern life. Sentimental encounters promise a breaking through of the categories of difference that keep us apart—an effacing of socioeconomic, generational, gendered, racial, even species difference. It's as if in moments of suspension, when bodies are impinging on one another, affecting and affected, but between states, in an *in-between-ness* that affect theorists have sought to highlight, in a *not-yet* state of potential for change, there is a space for neutrality in which power imbalances might be cancelled out, and affective assemblages created that offer newly born communities primed to act,

resistant to dualistic thinking, of the reign of me versus you, of us versus them.[23] This seems to be the implicit promise of the sentimental encounter, which at least for a time holds out a way to overcome the inequities that mark the material relation of the (often bourgeois male) subject and the typical interlocutor: the fallen woman, the rural poor, the suffering slave. It's not that these novelists and artists were reading Spinoza, and certainly not Deleuze and Félix Guattari's Spinoza-inspired vision of the revolutionary potential of planar relations. But recent accounts of the immanent power of affective intensities do wield some explanatory power when it comes to trying to figure out the *mentalité* of a society that had an apparently insatiable appetite for scenes of affective excess, rehearsed over and over again—to the point that to an outsider, it can all seem too much, both the emotional charge and the repetition of what can quickly seem formulaic and hackneyed, when pathos turns to bathos and the possibility of satire slips in.

Works governed by the sentimental mode and writings of contemporary affect theorists focus on the energies in play in interpersonal encounters, moving past interest in mere sociability to celebrate the power of raw affectual states to be transformational in themselves. Such encounters produce, in the eighteenth-century idiom, a commingling of feeling souls in moments of "transport" or, in current parlance, "intensities" of "flows" that circulate among animate and inanimate phenomena, and promise a state of "rapture" (as Charles Altieri puts it in his recent articulation of an aesthetics of the affects).[24] Implied in all of this is that some emancipatory potential resides in the stimulation of the sensory-perceptual apparatus, in the collision of bodies in time and space, in the merging and unmerging of identities. What this potential might be cannot be articulated clearly, though, neither by affect theorists nor by writers of sensibility—for it's an article of faith in both camps that these limited intensities generate a profound knowing and fullness of being that's ineffable, and hence resistant to reasoned analysis. (As Eric Shouse puts it in his recent account of the operations of affect, "The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language"; as Mackenzie describes the response of his Man of Feeling to the scene of tearful reunion presented above, "There were a thousand sentiments;—but they gushed so impetuously on his heart, that he could not utter a syllable."[25]) So in both cases we are left with rhapsodic affirmations of the potential of charged encounters to somehow act as cure-all, to heal the wounds of alienation in a society riven then as now by inequity. Perhaps because the promise of affect is always a matter of potential, of the virtual, of connections made on an infinite set of possible planes of relation, where to go with assemblages once forged remains beyond thinking. The annihilation of self offered by the Burkean sublime—in the liminal-state encounter with the Godhead—finds its analogue in the *always-becoming* of Deleuzean transcendental empiricism: "The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities."[26]

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It may seem a bit of a stretch to read affect theory through the Age of Sensibility, but as the metaphysics that underwrites current affect theory comes clearer into view, it has struck me that scholarship informed by such thinking may be doomed to suffer the same fate as the sentimentalist turn of mind in this sharing of a largely unexamined faith in the salutary effects of heightened affect. To take scenes of affective excess at face value—to read them not just as representing a more complex picture of the material embeddedness of the human, but as holding out a credible promise of reconciliation if not redemption—would be to counter the critique offered by the symptomatic reading. The effect would be to vacate the results of investigations carried out over the past three decades by scholars of eighteenth-century British and nineteenth-century American culture that reveal the exploitative dynamics at work in the countless scenes of sentimental excess that punctuate novels and plays when, after the moment of communion, there seems on offer little lasting relief of the suffering on display nor interrogation of the material causes of that suffering.[27] There may soon appear on the horizon a way out of the current impasse, where a desire for repair militates against a habit of paranoid reading. Regardless of outcome, though, it will continue to be important for the literary critic or the social scientist to remember that at root the (inter)personal is political, and that we forget this at our peril.

At the moment, it seems as if bare acknowledgement of materiality has supplanted cultural materialist method, as teasings-out of an ontology of feeling replace critiques of base and superstructure. So how might the turn to affect as master category be problematic, when celebration of intensities can feel so good? In a recent book Pieter Vermeulen gets to the heart of the matter, taking to task the "versions of cultural and social theory that tend to reify affect as the material substrate of human behavior"—and in so doing valorize the prepersonal over the individual. He observes that

> the main problem with [a] strict separation between affect and consciousness is that it allows invocations of affect to claim a privileged access to the material determinants of culture, and to immunize themselves from critique. Such rigorously undialectical mobilizations of affect underwrite an uncritical posthumanism that fails to account for the ineluctability of consciousness, cognition, intention, and narrative in the understanding of contemporary life.[28]

Vermeulen here grasps a fundamental weakness. We now have highly theorized accounts of affect that are hobbled by an inarticulacy that would seem required of the object of study: phenomena that resist capture in discourse. And underlying it all is the kind of self-licensing politics of virtue that drives any revolutionary method, even one that celebrates the ineffable as a cultural

and social good. Vermeulen is interested in the literature that represents contemporary life, but it may help to take the long view here on the history of conceptualizing affective agency. One fact then becomes clear: that much recent work on affect falls prey to the same problem as the sentimental idealism that gripped an earlier time, in that aspiration stands in place of evidence, and little is offered beyond hopeful assertions that affective events have the potential to produce a more holistic union among all constituents, including human, animal, even inorganic actants.

Instructive on this point is Clive Barnett, one of the few scholars versed in the theory who has written from a stance of what might be called sympathetic skepticism. Focusing on the influential work of political theorist William Connolly and human geographer Nigel Thrift, Barnett challenges the assumption that the circulation of affect powers positive change. Barnett identifies what he calls a "normative blind-spot" to such thinking, since there's not necessarily a progressive valence to heightened affect per se.[29] As the last century has shown, charging up the emotions of a volatile body politic can be a strategy deployed by fascists to great effect.[30] Another case in point to my mind is the widespread faith during the eighteenth century in the beneficial nature of sentimental feeling, which rests on similar assumptions about the cultural politics of emotion. As George Boulukos has recently observed, it's not right to assume that, for instance, "sentimental attention to the suffering of slaves" would necessarily lead to the political action required for abolition. Indeed, he notes, "Sentiment, on close inspection, turns out to be a cultural form without a predetermined content."[31] It could be argued that North American culture at large now, with its ethos of confession and therapy, has entered an Age of Sensibility redux, in which reflexive instinct is valorized not just as the basis for a fuller ontology, for fleshing out what Hume termed a "science of human nature," but as a basis for a universal ethics as well.

Affect theorists often focus in on "the event," a particular juncture in time and space when the perceiving agent is affected by external forces and a window of potentiality opens on a new way of being—we see this focus in recent work by sociologists, political theorists, geographers, and others.[32] Underwriting all of this is a phenomenology of becoming, most influentially Spinoza's account of the joy that comes with the recognition that one's sense of individuality is a fiction, an incomplete account of what it is to be fully human. For Spinoza only in giving oneself up to the immanent power of the energies that can circulate among subjects and subjects, subjects and objects, even objects and objects, can the human reach its potential for self-realization. Deleuze, often working with Guattari, built on these insights in his call in the aftermath of the upheavals of the 1960s to harness a spirit of "nomad" thinking to counter the repressive apparatus of "State" thinking exemplified in the law-enforcing ethos of traditional philosophy.[33] Later affect theorists have this emancipatory warrant implicitly in hand as they offer the prospect of new assemblages

emerging out of the flux of contingency and difference as a means to break free of the bounds that hold us back. The challenge for the cultural critic now would seem to be to move beyond mere acceptance of this promise of becoming and to articulate a plan, or perhaps a framework, or even just a bare rationale that could underwrite progressive action.

Perhaps the most politically self-reflexive and attractive recent attempt to factor in more fully the affective charge of both human and non-human is the "vital materialism" of Jane Bennett. But even while she articulates an explicit political stance—what she calls a "green materialist" ecophilosophy that seeks to make the world a better place—Bennett can offer no pragmatic method by which her revisionist worldview can be implemented on the ground. (She cites Bruno Latour's rather cryptic call that we convene "a parliament of things," but concludes that this is "an idea that is as provocative as it is elusive": an apt appraisal for much recent neo-vitalist rumination.[34]) Perhaps there will always be this limit—whether to what has come to be called the "new materialism" or to the paradigm of "thinking matter" in the eighteenth century: understanding the *thingness* of people and our potential to be affected by and to affect other impinging bodies at the molecular level may not in itself lead to much beyond an awareness of interrelatedness, an awareness of cold matter enlivened by energies which in themselves cannot produce a progressive political program.[35]

What's yet to become clear, finally, is whether in its privileging of sensitive embodiment as a good in itself, affect theory—much like the sentimental frame of mind—can have much to say about how to effect positive change in the world. Since in some quarters an ontology of feeling that celebrates the posthuman would seem to displace the desire for an articulated ideological critique, can any of this be of use to a politically inflected criticism? Or, as with the ideals of the Age of Sensibility that came before, might the underlying assumptions of current theory be at best hopeful, and at worst naïve, perhaps at root no less conservative than progressive—and in the end prone to ridicule? These are the broader questions that still need to be answered as we grope toward understanding how celebrating the intensities of the affected body could ground a practical ethics of critique. Acknowledging fully both the influence of affect on cognition and the power of affective bonds to form resistant communities has the potential to move us past the traditional mind/body split in Western thinking and truly offer a way forward, one marked by a more nuanced critique, increased psychosocial health, and effective political agency. But it's not yet clear whether in the end this might all be just wishful thinking, based on a fuzzy if energetic neo-vitalism that merely inverts the traditional hierarchy of values—so that all we're left with is a reversal of René Descartes's *cogito*, along the lines: "I *feel*, therefore I am." What is more clear, I hope, is that reading current affect theories through the visions of impassioned bodies alive in early modern culture affords a comparatist perspective on the history of emotions that is both productive and timely.

NOTES

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1. Eric Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," *M/C Journal* 8, no. 6 (2005), para. 9, available at journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php.

2. Patricia Ticineto Clough, "Afterword: The Future of Affect Studies," *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 222–30.

3. See Julian Henriques, "The Vibrations of Affect and Their Propagation on a Night Out on Kingston's Dancehall Scene," *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 57–89; Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed* (New York, 2003); and Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, 2002), 23–25.

4. See Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434–72, 451n31. For additional critique of what Leys terms "the new affective aesthetic," see her "Trauma and the Turn to Affect," in *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel*, ed. Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga (Amsterdam, 2012), 3–27. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley's epoch-setting essay "The Affective Fallacy" first appeared in 1949 (*The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 [Winter 1949]: 31–55).

5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, 2003), 8–9, and chap. 4.

6. To counter what he decries as a tradition of dualistic, even fascistic thinking that aims to negate difference and above all ascribe a stable identity to the subject, Gilles Deleuze collapses subject-object distinction. He instead develops a vision of decentralized networks of relations always marked by potential, by flux, by a perpetual state of becoming rather than being. Deleuze celebrates the generation of multiplicity in a process of creative movement figured as lines of flight, as circulations of depersonalized intensities; disparate entities coalesce on a "plane of consistency," forging new combinations, "assemblages," communities. The most influential articulation of the revolutionary potential of such planar relations comes in the book Deleuze wrote with Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Massumi [Minneapolis, 1987]), especially the chapters "Rhizome" (3–25) and "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible. . ." (232–309).

7. Baruch Spinoza looms large, for example, in recent collections assessing the state of this field of inquiry: *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, 2010); and *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Clough and Jean O'Malley Halley (Durham, 2007). Spinoza articulates his conception of discrete affects generated in bodies affected by interrelational forces in his *Ethics*, first published in 1677.

8. As Thomas Dixon shows, our conception of the emotions emerges later, in the nineteenth century; see *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge, 2003).

9. See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17; and Gregg and Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 1–25, 10–11.

10. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), i, 3ff.

11. Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, "Askêmata," in *Complete Works, Correspondence and Posthumous Writings*, 11 vols., ed. Wolfram Benda et al. (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt, 2011), 2.6:57–470, 188.

12. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (London, 1751), 144; quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, 2010), 39.

13. Theodore M. Brown notes that "one of the most striking features of English phys-

iology in the forty years between 1730 and 1770 was the dramatic, indeed precipitous decline of varieties of mechanism and the rapid rise to preeminence of alternate varieties of vitalism" ("From Mechanism to Vitalism in Eighteenth-Century English Physiology," *Journal of the History of Biology* 7, no. 2 [1974]: 179–216). For a thorough account of the move to vitalism in medical science, see Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 2005).

14. For a concise account of modern neo-vitalist thinking—most relevant here is the line running from Gabriel Tarde to Henri Bergson to Gilles Deleuze—see Scott Lash, "Life (Vitalism)," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 323–29. On the earlier vitalist tradition, see Catherine Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (New York, 2012), and Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore, 2013). Packham notes significantly that vitalist physiology of the mid-eighteenth century "re-posed the relationship of the subject to the body by emphasizing the limits of the mind's control over the body and the autonomy of the body as a self-directing, self-controlling entity, and more broadly by offering a model of the 'self' as animated, vital, fluid and in flux, rather than under the rational, conscious and regulated control of a reasoning mind. Its relevance to the emergent culture of sensibility . . . where such a depiction of the self operated, is thus clearly evident" (11).

15. Rather than follow common practice and use *sentimental* to describe a literary and rhetorical style in vogue from the 1740s to the 1780s, I use the term more broadly to denote a focus on affective excess shared across periods and cultures. My reading of this representational mode as fundamentally sentimental is indebted to Emma Barker's *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment* (Cambridge, 2005), and James Chandler's *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago, 2013).

16. See, for example, paintings such as Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* [1770] (available at upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4f/Benjamin_West_005.jpg) and Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Father's Curse* [1778] (available at upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Jean-Baptiste_Greuze_-_The_Father's_Curse_-_The_Ungrateful_Son_-_WGA10661.jpg).

17. Charles Le Brun's history paintings in this vein include *The Family of Darius Before Alexander* [ca. 1660] (available at upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/02/Charles_Le_Brun_-_The_Family_of_Darius_before_Alexander_-_WGA12532.jpg). His major work is the posthumously published treatise *Conférence de M. Le Brun sur l'expression générale et particulière* (ed. Gaëtan Picard [Paris, 1698]), a source for much-copied images of extreme emotional states (see, for example, www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histmed/image?08891). For Le Brun's influence in his time and in subsequent decades, see Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions: The Origins and Influence of Charles Le Brun's* Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière (New Haven, 1994), and Line Cottegnies, "Codifying the Passions in the Classical Age: A Few Reflections on Charles Le Brun's Scheme and Its Influence in France and in England," *Etudes Epistémè* 1 (2002): 141–58.

18. See Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, 4 vols. (New York, 1962–91); and Ekman, "Basic Emotions," in *The Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, ed. T. Dalgleish and M. Power (New York, 1999), 47–60.

19. See especially Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; and Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London, 2007).

20. David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago, 1988), esp. 216. Such a reading invokes of course another paradigm for forces that drive human action, the psychoanalytic, a genealogy traced through Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and Jacques Lacan that shapes another influential strain of affect theory, represented most notably in the work of Sedgwick. See for example Sedgwick's late essay, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 625–42.

21. Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, 2nd ed. corrected (London, 1771), 215–16.

22. See Stephen Ahern, *Affected Sensibilities: Romantic Excess and the Genealogy of the Novel, 1680–1810* (New York, 2007).

23. For a lucid discussion of the promise of "in-between-ness" and of Roland Barthes on "the Neutral," see Gregg and Siegworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," 1–4, 10–11. Pieter Vermeulen writes eloquently of the process by which "affect dissolves the self-contained interiority of the individual and opens it to new connections and recombinations" (*Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* [Basingstoke, 2015], 8).

24. Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, 2003).

25. Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," para. 5; Mackenzie, *Man of Feeling*, 216.

26. See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757), Part 2.6, "Power"; and Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 249.

27. See, for example, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York, 1992); Judith Frank, *Common Ground: Eighteenth-Century English Satiric Fiction and the Poor* (Stanford, 1997); Laura Hinton, *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sadomasochistic Sentiments from* Clarissa *to* Rescue 911 (Albany, 1999); Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, 2006); and my *Affected Sensibilities* and the introduction to *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770–1830*, ed. Ahern (Aldershot, 2013), 1–19.

28. Vermeulen, *Creature, Affect, Form*, 8–9.

29. Clive Barnett, "Political Affects in Public Space: Normative Blind-Spots in Non-Representational Ontologies," *Transactions of the Institute for British Geography* n.s. 33, no. 2 (2008): 186–200. Other trenchant critiques of the methods and assumptions of affect theorists include Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (Los Angeles, 2012); Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, "Biology's Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect," *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 29–56; and Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548–67.

30. Instructive here is Ahmed's analysis of emotionally charged rhetoric deployed by nationalists to whip up xenophobic response; see *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, 2004), 1–4.

31. George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge, 2008), 3, 14.

32. Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, for example, write eloquently of "the possibility of a new *event* (a new *virtual potential* for things to happen differently), of a new set of *physical territories* . . . and of a new set of *existential territories* (these include . . . new modes of living, new laws, new sign systems, discourses . . . new emotions and feelings, new powers to affect and be affected)" ("An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain," in *Affect Theory Reader*, 138–57, 142).

Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on the importance of the event or encounter is key. Also influential has been Alain Badiou's conception of the event; see, for example, Adrian Johnston, "Courage Before the Event: The Force of Affects," *Filozofski vestnik* 29, no. 2 (2008): 101–33.

33. For a concise account of the consistently radical tenor to Deleuze's work, see Massumi's "Translator's Foreword" to *A Thousand Plateaus*, ix–xv.

34. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, 2010), 104.

35. Bennett acknowledges this difficulty in an interview given after her book appeared: "The political strategy I pursue in order to enhance the prospects for 'greener' modes of consumption and production is an indirect one: the story of vibrant matter I tell seeks to induce a greater attentiveness to the active power of things. . . . Perhaps this new attentiveness will translate into more thoughtful and sustainable public policies. I am not sure that

it will, but it is, I think, a possibility worth pursuing for a while. My political strategy is indirect because its target is not the macro-level politics of laws, policy, institutional change but the micro-politics of sensibility-formation" (Peter Gratton, "Vibrant Matters: An Interview with Jane Bennett," *Philosophy in a Time of Error* [April 22, 2010], available at philosophyinatimeoferror.com/2010/04/22/vibrant-matters-an-interview-with-jane-bennett).