

Affect

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“AFFECT” gives us a way to talk about a description of the sound of bluebells agitating one another on a heath; to evoke a barely registered discomfiture in a marriage plot, the consequences of which won’t emerge for several hundred pages; or, to explain why certain oddball literary characters don’t quite feel like people. Critics use the term, broadly, to mark a minimal subjectivity that evades standard procedures for knowing the self and the social. Fugitive and impersonal, affective states are said to circulate outside of the individual, irreducible to the more conceptual thoughts or even emotions an individual might have about them. Neither active nor passive, they preclude a unitary vision of the self-willing subject, and instead point to the subtle processes by which the self is an “intimate public” absorbing what is outside it.¹ Therefore, the term is also metacritical: it offers a way to acknowledge a critical culture that overvalues exemplary individual acts of producing what counts as disciplinary knowledge, and to analyze the shifts in critical atmosphere that occur collectively, including the significant one brought about by affectively-oriented criticism itself.

Atmosphere and mood might be the most flexible and significant affective terms right now. Rita Felski, building on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s groundbreaking *Touching Feeling*, notes that critics are newly receptive to “delving into the eddies and flows of affective engagement, trying to capture something of the quality and the sheer intensity of attachments and orientations rather than rushing to explain them, judge them, or wish them away”; her recent *The Limits of Critique* attempts to steer critical mood away from a dominant, corrosive suspiciousness.² As Felski’s recent respondents in *PMLA* have established, such “delving” cannot constitute the full work of literary criticism; the V21 Manifesto, moreover, approaches the question of critical mood from the opposite standpoint—suspicion is absent, whereas the “primary affective mode” of Victorian studies is said to be “the amused chuckle.”³ Whether we recognize either, both, or neither characterizations of the field’s mood, it seems ineluctable that in our shared spaces, whether live, paper, or electronic, some shift has undoubtedly taken place, even just insofar as mood has become a prominent term for metacritique. Mood is said—like affect more generally—to lack a telos; Jonathan Flatley defines it as an atmospheric precondition “in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects.”⁴ The term

thus provides a way of thinking about the many scales of our critical project. It points to broad questions of the overall, sometimes far from conscious, tenor of academic discourse. Perhaps more importantly, it captures the work of reading in the classroom and beyond—the textures of a local, close reading, professional or not, alone or in a group, once or many times over many years.

What we do with “mood” points to the value as well as limitations of “affect” more generally. Affect theory offers an especially provocative critical vocabulary and approach for Victorian studies because it offers an alternative to painting the Victorians as constitutively anxious and self-willed, or ourselves as suspicious, bemused, or somehow both. Yet it is attended by two significant questions, recently posed with particular force: to what extent affect theory needs to rely on the findings of experimental science; and, whether its politics are necessarily progressive or even radical. If affect is “a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect,” according to Teresa Brennan, some theorists substantiate the distinction between affect and emotion by appeals to clinical studies.⁵ Ruth Leys, however, has devastated these scientific claims by carefully taking apart the implications of studies and paradigms frequently cited by humanists, especially the line on affect derived not from Benedict Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze, but the more partitioned accounts of feeling that come from Sylvan Tompkins, Paul Ekman, and Antonio Damasio. Moreover, affect theory’s alliance with the non-conceptual (despite its affiliation with these more structured theories) tends to elicit utopian statements about the immanent possibility of political transformation.⁶ For instance, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, introducing the *Affect Theory Reader*, recommend “casting a line along the hopeful (though also fearful) cusp of an emergent futurity, casting its lot with the infinitely connectable, impersonal, and contagious belongings to *this* world.”⁷ But with Steven Goldsmith, I would ask why there is any reason to believe that “critical emotion is the precondition of a future agency to come,” especially if, *pace* Leys, that feeling is imagined as utterly anti-conceptual and anti-intentional: the belief in affect’s transformative power might merely invert hierarchies of value, privileging affect over reason, in order to redeem feelings often coded as far from positive (pain, self-loss, slow violence).⁸ A kindred disenchantment of affect’s politics appears in Amanda Anderson’s account of the Kleinian psychoanalytic framework underpinning Sedgwick’s work. For Anderson, this account, based upon extra-literary claims about mind, suggests a fundamental investment in psychic conflict that remains continuous with the relatively more cynical politics of the hermeneutics of suspicion.⁹

These critiques must be taken seriously. Still, it does not make sense to view them as entirely foreclosing affectively oriented *methods*, nor does it fully explain why we might want a vocabulary for talking about non-intentionality or non-conceptuality, as slippery as the idea of a non-conceptual concept might be. A not-particularly-politicized concept of affect has been exceptionally productive for scholars of Victorian literature, notably Rachel Ablow, Jesse Oak Taylor, and Benjamin Morgan, whose recent monographs concern the intersection of aesthetic forms with scientific concepts—pain, atmosphere, physiology—that put pressure on the culturally enshrined but newly problematized concept of consciousness in the nineteenth century. Ablow, for instance, attends to affect theory’s optimism historically, arguing that Charles Darwin’s account of both pain and emotion “demand an affective registration that is discomfiting at least in part because of its incompatibility with concrete ameliorative intervention.”¹⁰ Given many Victorians’ interest in theorizing the physical basis of mind both scientifically and in the arts themselves, it makes sense to see Victorian literature as theorizing what recognizably looks like affect’s precursor. Particularly so because they were sometimes explicitly working in a recuperated Spinozist vein or in response to Darwin’s account of emotion’s evolution (both part of affect’s dual genealogy). A historicized version of affect is more compelling than a purely theoretical one, perhaps, because these critics have at most a weak investment in affirming Victorian approaches to body-mind through the lens of our own currents in neuroscience. But given the emphasis in recent affect theory on affect’s fugitive dimensions, it becomes more than a tool of intellectual history’s documentation of changing approaches to thinking about how the self is constituted by, and shot through, with non-self. It also offers a way to consider how literary style and form register these shifting beliefs in terms that somewhat diverge from what Caroline Levine, in her major *Forms*, identifies as structures that forge social intelligibility, both like but also unlike the way mood is supposed to subtend intellection. “Atmosphere” and “tone”—which have little role to play in Levine’s account—are formal terms that evoke a negative or inscrutable relation to the social structures that emerge from form in her sense.¹¹ And while they depend upon subtle formal features that benefit from the application of a technical literary critical vocabulary, they are perceptible and influential for many kinds of readers and readings. Affect, then, seems likely to continue to be productive as a way of thinking about how form, and various approaches to formal analysis, work.

Moreover, the fact that so much theoretical work oriented toward affect (for, against, or somewhere in between) comes from critics whose careers

began with Victorian literature (Sedgwick, Felski, Anderson, Isobel Armstrong) is instructive, suggesting that Victorian literature has something distinctive to teach us about the relation between feeling and concept. Although Victorian novels and poems are filled with the phenomenological intensities and social contagions affect theory evokes, they also—according to Anderson and Armstrong—tend to feature a doubled, far more analytical and diagnostic project very much associated with, and directly related to, “criticism’s” projects of “explaining” and “judging.”¹² How we position ourselves in relation to the knowledge we make is a major question of so many Victorian novels and poems. It’s affect’s question too.

NOTES

1. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.
2. Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (London: Blackwell, 2009), 19.
3. “Manifesto of the V21 Collective,” V21 Collective, <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/> (accessed December 28, 2017). Amanda Anderson notes the odd absence of the hermeneutics of suspicion in the V21 Manifesto, which offers an almost entirely contrasting image of collective critical mood from Felski’s, though in a sense it might not have been possible without the attention to mood Sedgwick initiated and Felski elaborated (“Therapeutic Criticism,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 50, no. 3 (2017): 321–28, 321). In *PMLA*’s March 2017 forum on Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), see especially Diana Fuss, “But What About Love?” *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 352–55.
4. Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19.
5. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 3.
6. See Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), especially 18.
7. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4 (emphasis original).
8. Steven Goldsmith, *Blake’s Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 310. As Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant suggest, the reconfiguration of agency by affective shifts can serve to diagnose the social situations that engender

affects without offering transformative potential. See Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Berlant. Even for Kathleen Stewart, who evokes with great nuance an “ordinary affect” that constitutes “a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind” that makes “the world . . . still tentative, charged, overwhelming, and alive,” nonetheless, “this is not a good thing or a bad thing” (*Ordinary Affects* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2007], 128).

9. See Anderson, “Therapeutic Criticism,” 323.
10. Rachel Ablow, *Victorian Pain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 116. See also Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); and Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016).
11. See Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
12. See Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), which makes an argument about the Victorian realist novel that resonates with Isobel Armstrong’s account of the double poem in her *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996).



Anachronism

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IT is timely to be untimely these days. Anachronism, long understood as an error to avoid, has become a key dimension of diverse historicist methods. Postcolonial and queer theorists, in particular, celebrate anachronism as a visible site of dislocation that calls what counts as timely and what constitutes history into question.¹ Espousing what Bliss Cua Lim calls “temporal critique,” postcolonial theorists show that the homogenous, empty time upon which Western history depends relegates non-Western people and practices to a previous historical moment.² In turn, queer theorists question the “straight time” of history—the way linear time reinforces heteronormative patterns of development and