

# An Archaeology of Affect: Reading, History and Gender

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*Literary history is filled with stories of reading as a deeply affective experience. Why does our own age deem such reactions trivial? And why is affective reading almost exclusively now associated with women readers?*

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‘It is a general phenomenon of our nature that the mournful, the shocking, the shudder-inducing attracts us with irresistible magic, that we feel ourselves repelled and attracted with equal force when lamentation and fright come upon us.’ (30) These words by Friedrich Schiller about the powerful effects of art are as applicable to the concept of catharsis in antiquity as to the eighteenth century sublime; as relevant to the tender emotions promised by the sentimental novel as to the blood-curdlings of the Gothic or the nerve-tinglings of sensation fiction; are still as germane to the shock tactics of the twentieth century avant-garde as to the thrills of the Hollywood blockbuster in our own time; and will be pertinent when it comes to the multi-sensory stimulations of virtual reality.

It is one thing, of course, to concede that a work of art can move us to compassion, and force tears to our eyes, or strike such fear into its readers as to make their hair stand on end, or that an erotic work might tease us sufficiently to inflame our passions; it is another thing, particularly in our present age, to entertain the idea that art is pleasurable, and as such also worthy, because it has the capacity to affect – *move* – its audience. And yet, terms associated with the affective pleasures of literature, such as ‘*moving, exciting, entertaining, pitiful*’ which the New Criticism declared ‘uncritical’ (Ransom 343), circumscribed an audience’s encounter with the ‘literary’ for almost two millennia. The clearest articulation that affect once was a measure of a work’s excellence is to be found in the rhetorical tradition, comprising writers such as Gorgias, Aristotle, Horace, and in the

neo-Longinian principles of the sublime re-visited in the eighteenth century. Its clearest rejection as an important aesthetic literary category is articulated in W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's 'The Affective Fallacy' where they argue that catharsis, empathy, rapture, synaesthesia and the willingness to suspend disbelief are hallmarks of critical vagary – a confusion between 'the poem and its *results*' (22), what literature *is* and what it *does*. Even the more contemporary accounts of affective reader-response which dismiss the affective fallacy, such as Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books*, often identify the pleasures of reading with the practices of the 'common' reader and align the enjoyments experienced with reading popular fiction. This suggests that the link which the ancients once made between pleasurable reading and the heights of literary achievement has become mutually exclusive.

My aim here is to outline some of the reasons for this mutual exclusivity, and to suggest an alternative. I want to show how the reading of literary texts, and crucially our conceptions of what this involves, has changed historically, not least because of the invention of print – without which the novel as a genre is unthinkable (Feather 96–97, 150). In so doing, I want to trace the demise of affect as an important critical category of literary reception, a demise we can first notice in the de-valuation of affect in eighteenth century rational discourses, as well as in the suspicion during this period, often voiced in anti-fiction writings and novels about novel-reading, that the new genre affected readers, especially women, too much. The novel and in particular its sub-genres, the sentimental, the gothic and the sensation novel, which deliberately played on affective response, were associated with the facile and visceral tastes of a newly emerging consumer class of novel-reader – more interested, educationalists feared, in the gratification of the senses than the cultivation of the mind. In other words, the affected reader is no longer a *connoisseur* of refined sentiment, but an avid consumer of what Adorno and Horkheimer would later call the culture industry.

I want to suggest that the rise of the novel was a crucial reason why affective pleasure ceased to be a valuable aesthetic category of literary criticism. Whereas affect had been part of the dominant aesthetics of taste since the ancients (a yardstick for sifting out effective from ineffective poetic and dramatic techniques), with the rise of the novel affect is no longer a sensation to be approved of but resisted, and the pleasures of affected reading, as we shall see, no longer endorsed but pathologised. In this respect, the novel as a genre was instrumental in the association of affect with what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'popular aesthetic' based on "'vulgar" enjoyment' (Bourdieu 4). That this demarcation of taste, which in effect

creates a polarity between ‘low’ and ‘high-brow’ pleasures of reading, or between the ‘common’ and the ‘academic’ reader, still informs even those critics intent to mobilise affect as a crucial aspect of reader experience, is a testament to how persuasive discourses which since Kant have stressed the dispassionate and disinterested encounter with literature have been.

Finally, I want to illustrate why affect, although a troubled category for feminism, especially for those who take their cue from Mary Wollstonecraft’s form of rational sexual politics, should nevertheless form a vital aspect of research in the history of reading from the perspective of gender. Thus, rather than devaluing affect as a mushy form of engagement with imaginative works, appropriate and mostly applicable to culinary art, we ought to remind ourselves of the long history this concept has enjoyed as a distinguished category of aesthetic experience.

### **Affective responses**

In the rhetorical tradition of criticism there was little doubt amongst critics that the poetic and dramatic was not only meant to please (*delectare*) and instruct (*docere*), but also move (*movere*) audiences – a dictum which had ‘justified all aesthetic practice from antiquity to the later modern period’ (Jauss 30). Take Gorgias, just one of the many ancient thinkers who stressed the affective power of the poetic. ‘To its listeners’, Gorgias explains, ‘poetry brings a fearful shuddering, a tearful pity, and a grieving desire while through its words the soul feels its own feelings for good and bad fortune in the affairs and lives of others’ (Gorgias 9). Gorgias also reasons that speech can have both positive and negative effects on its listeners: it can persuade as well as delude, it can stimulate the world of the senses as well as numb them, it can ‘stir’ us to noble deeds as well as ‘bewitch’ us to do evil. In this sense, poetry (which is ‘speech [*logos*] with meter’) can be understood as *pharmakon*, namely as having both a beneficial *and* a harmful effect (14). Similarly, Aristotle’s explanation of catharsis points to the disturbing and therapeutic effects that ‘pity and fear, and “enthusiasm” too’ can have on audiences. ‘The array of sensory emotions, which tragedy arouses in its audience, carries them to fever pitch as they feel for the suffering of others. Afterwards, however, in the proportion appropriate to the pity and fear experienced, the audience’s pent-up emotion finds ‘pleasurable relief’. It is not only sympathy for a given character’s plight which unleashes emotions: a melody is just as capable of stirring ‘the mind to frenzy’, only then to restore and attain, ‘healing and catharsis’ (Aristotle 1342a 4–15).

In this respect affect is not just the result of identification – a mistake often made by critics who see the classic realist novel, drama or film, because it encourages an affective bond between readers/spectators and characters, as the primary means by which an audience might lose themselves in fiction; rather, affect can also be experienced when it comes to an art form as non-representational as music, or when it comes to the rhythms of language. Why? Because music and words make themselves felt in the body. Thus, skillful composition, whether of music or words, is a source of the sublime for Longinus. In his treatise *On the Sublime* he points to stylistic and structural features as a means by which to transport an audience to rapture, casting ‘a spell on us’ and ‘gaining a complete mastery over our minds’ (159). As such, affect is triggered not just by sympathetic identification but also by the sheer power of poetic structure and expression; in a modern lexis, by content but also by form. This is perhaps nowhere more clearly expressed than in Hélène Cixous’ address of the somatics of reading:

[W]hat remains of music in writing, and which exists also in music properly speaking, is indeed that scansion which *also* does its work on the body of the reader. The texts that touch me most strongly, to the point of making me shiver or laugh, are those that have not repressed their musical structure [...]. (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 64)

If what is abstract, without representational content, can move the reader, *make her shiver*, as Cixous claims here, then affect does not rely on meaning or cognition, but rather the reverse. Nor does affect rely on recognition, the experiential communion so often associated with representational realism, but can also be stimulated by formally experimental avant-garde works of art where understanding meaning is of little relevance. Affect for Cixous is transformative, but not in the sense of a self-definition, a finding of oneself in the other, as it is the case for the humanistically oriented critic. Rather, the self is put into *ek-stasis* – literally beyond itself. As such the self undergoes passion, responds viscerally rather than cognitively, that is, prior to the control of mind. This somatism is also reflected in Cixous’ conception of writing. Of her own practice she says that ‘I undergo writing! [...] I was seized. From where? [...] From some bodily region. I don’t know where. “Writing” seized me, gripped me, around the diaphragm, between the stomach and the chest [...]’ (Cixous, *Coming to Writing* 9). Thus, for Cixous the affective delights of transport are linked to the sublime, and as such also to a Longinian tradition, where the medium of expression itself – say, language – can grip us, get hold of us, and move the writer and the reader to new passionate heights.

## **(Early) resisting readers**

In the Longinian scenario of audience response, it is apparent that the reader/hearer, when faced with the sublime as the very height of poetic achievement is powerless to its 'irresistible' effects. There are several lines of thought which follow from this. The arts are potentially dangerous, as Plato already made clear, because of the passions they 'feed and water' in us ('*Republic*' 607). But so are affect and ecstasy, because they entail a loss of self. When Socrates asks whether a man moved to tears or terror by a tale is a man who is still 'in his senses' ('*Ion*' 535d–e), his critique of the poetic, while acknowledging the power of affect, also deems it dangerously irrational; so dangerous that Plato suggests it must be banished from the Republic. Loss of the critical faculties is also a reason why affect is pathologised in eighteenth century rationalist discourses, including in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Affect threatens to undermine the autonomy of self, and with it agency. Affect must therefore be resisted for the subject to determine, through acting in accordance with law, him- or herself as a subject. For if the subject succumbs to affect, she is carried away, overwhelmed passively, by emotion rather than engaging actively her critical faculty. Mind in effect would have given in to body. When Kant (89–96) talks about the necessity of guarding against, and resisting, the power of affect – whether with reference to nature or art – he is concerned that we master that which threatens to master us. Schiller makes a similar point in his essay 'On the Pathetic' with reference to tragedy. The more intense the suffering and the more heightened therefore the pathos experienced, the more it is a test for us to prove our mastery over affect. This is to say, there must be pathos, because only through our resistance to its powerful hold can we prove our freedom and independence as rational subjects (Schiller 55). For rationalists sensations and feelings – because they are not amenable to the mind's rational control – are not only dangerous for the proper arrangement of an individual's faculties but also to the whole fabric of society. We must therefore, to borrow Wollstonecraft's repetition of these ideas, ascend from 'creatures of sensation' to 'rational creatures' (Wollstonecraft 131, 101).

## **The sensuous reader**

The widespread assumption that '[r]eason is in man, feeling in woman' (Novalis 382) fed the fear that woman's supposed emotionalism would lead her to overreact to what she reads. The quixotic reader, who ap-

pears frequently in eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, is as a consequence stereotypically female. Take the main protagonist of Flaubert's *Emma Bovary*. Unlike Charlotte Lennox' Arabella or Jane Austen's Catherine Morland, two heroines who learn to become sensible readers, Emma Bovary remains a sensuous reader to the bitter end. Perpetually on the look-out for stimulation and excitement, to alleviate the boredom of her own existence, she hurries from one page, or book, to another, using fiction 'to kindle her passions' (*Flaubert* 30) and to feed her 'impure longings' (176). She yearns for the kind of life that 'brings the senses into bloom' (34). And whether she would fall into a trance (47) over a book, or scream in terror (235), or whether she would be 'trembling all over' which she does at the opera 'as though the bows of the violins were being drawn across her nerves' (180), or be 'sinking her fingernails into the velvet on her box' in the theatre (181), or nearly faint with the pressure of 'suffocating palpitations' (183), her enjoyment in all these instances is bodily. Her interest in fiction is therefore 'rooted in sensual rather than cognitive interests' (Felski, *Gender* 84). Even her engagement with religion, and its ostensibly instructive texts, she turns into extensions of her own romantic and sensuous fantasies (*Flaubert* 27).

Emma is not the kind of reader who reads between the lines; rather, the novel suggests, her mode of reading is akin to 'dreaming between the lines' (47). Thus she 'would forge connections' between real life and fictional lovers (45), and so absorbed is she in books that '[s]he was the lover in every novel, the heroine in every play, the vague *she* in every volume of poetry' (215). It is not just that Emma reads her own life into fiction, she also wants her life to be like the life represented in the fiction. Importantly for her, reading also introduces drama into her existence, illustrative of her willingness to live her life as if it were a fiction. Rita Felski argues that the reason why Emma reads too 'literally', and consequently blurs the distinction between 'life and art' (Felski, *Gender* 87), is because she fails to recognise 'the mediating authority of literary form' (83). This makes Emma's 'uncritical devouring of fiction', so Felski, 'a disturbing and threatening phenomenon, because it negates the autonomy of the literary artifact' (86). True, Emma does lose consciousness of the form which shapes the contents of a story, because it is transparent to her, but she also loses consciousness of self. If we ignore this, we miss a central aspect of Emma's pleasure of reading, and why it is deemed dangerous. What is disturbing and threatening about Emma's self-absorbing mode of reading is not, as Felski suggests, that it negates the *autonomy of the literary artifact* but that it negates the *autonomy of the subject*, that is, this subject's – here the reader's – agency in the interests of the passions. Emma is no longer, as Plato would

say, ‘in [her] senses’. Her reading experience is not cognitive or rational but affective, that is, deeply bodily.

On the one hand then, Emma is an intensive and absorbed reader who loses herself in a book. On the other, she reads so extensively that her reading practice cannot but be disparate. Thus, ‘her reading went the same way as her needlework, cluttering the cupboard, half finished; she picked it up, put it down, went on to something else’ (*Flaubert* 100). She is the very epitome of the warnings sounded in the periodical press of the day: she reads distractedly and fleetingly. Her restlessness thus makes her the paradigmatic nervous modern reader, who has barely finished one novel before grabbing the next. Emma’s reading habits are not even limited to novels, but are so voracious and uncontrolled that she seemingly reads everything in print, from the Bible, advertisements, reviews of dinner parties, ‘bizarre books, full of orgiastic set-pieces’ to ‘bloodthirsty adventures’ (45, 235). In this sense, Emma is a true product of print culture, as well as its prototypical mass consumer. Less interested in quality than quantity, or style than plot, she reads only for immediate pleasurable gratification: ‘From everything she had to extract some kind of personal profit; and she discarded as useless anything that did not lend itself to her heart’s immediate satisfaction’ (28).

### **The reader as consumer**

The reader as a consumer – literally consuming, that is, devouring books – is the figure most demonized during this period. The finger is consistently pointed at Gutenberg’s invention of print. As an efficient technology for the production of the written word, it is blamed for commercialising and democratising it, bringing not merely many books to many readers, but, it was felt, too many, and too fast, thus bringing about the kinds of indiscriminate reading practices Emma has fallen victim to. The novel’s fortunes, as I said earlier, are closely tied to changes in modern book production, not least because, unlike poetry (which given its size can be circulated easily) and unlike drama (which is intended for theatrical performance), it relies for its public existence on being printed, bound and mass-produced (Lodge 156). From its very beginnings the novel was a consumer product; a reason also why it had a questionable status, when compared to older literary forms such as poetry, addressed to the few. Indeed, invectives against the novel often came from poets, who saw it at best as a rival art to poetry, and at worst as a cheap form of entertainment (see Coleridge 463). The sheer number of warnings against (excessive) novel-reading illustrates the deep

distrust of a genre, which had so bewitched those who were literate and could read. Warnings in the periodical press about novels, and print in general, were occasioned variously by subject matters unfit for polite society; characters drawn too sympathetically; print hampering thinking, enfeebling minds, even the vigour of nations; fiction leading to work-shyness, idleness, and lofty notions of romance; reading-related illnesses with medical symptoms ranging from constipation, flabby stomachs, eye and brain disorders, to nerve complaints and mental disease. This is how A. Innes Shand (238–239) assesses the impact of Gutenberg's invention in 1879:

With printing and the promiscuous circulation of books the mischief that had broken out in Germany was spread everywhere by insidious contagion, like the Black Death of the fourteenth century. But unlike that subtle and deadly plague, it has gone on running its course ever since, and diffusing itself gradually through all classes of the community. The ferment of thought, the restless craving for intellectual excitement of some kind, have been stimulated; till now, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, we are being driven along at high-pressure pace; and it is impossible for any one who is recalcitrant to stop himself.

What is clear from this description is that the pace of reading, just as the pace of life, has accelerated to the extent that the very structure of experience has undergone a change: 'restless' and 'driven', but also fragmentary and discontinuous. The mind can barely keep pace with the tempo of modern times. When Nietzsche, less than ten years later, talks about the restlessness of his age, his definition of modernity conveys the sense of a modern sensibility which has become 'immensely more irritable', given the 'abundance of disparate impressions'. Thus, the intensity of physical and mental stimulation that an urban, and increasingly technologized, environment induced, has turned the 'critic', the 'interpreter', the 'observer', and crucially also the 'reader', into 'reactive talents' (Nietzsche 47). Stimuli are responded to, as if by reflex, and it has become impossible to absorb anything but in fragments.

## **Overstimulated readers**

Practices of reading were not only different before and after the invention of print in the mid-fifteenth century, but they also changed as the means of book production changed and increased output. Pulp, invented around 1860, contributed to the expansion of the book trade, because book production no longer relied on rags but could draw on the plentiful supply of wood (Martin 402), ensuring maximally consumable products. Thus pulp

supplied the raw material for cheap, mass-produced novels, not as artifacts to be preserved but as affordable products to be consumed and then discarded (*Practice and Representation* 8–9). This quantitative increase had qualitative cultural effects: overload in material and sensory terms. Insofar as the speed of production fed the rate of consumption, it is technology in this instance which is responsible for the afflictions that modern readers suffered. In short, the impact of technology on physiology became incremental.

Affective response, once epitomised by Odyssean tears (see Littau 65–69, 84), has, by the time Nietzsche writes, become a matter of nerves. This historicity of affect is borne out by Shand's comparison between the 'easy-going tranquillity' of a bygone age, which the 'discovery of printing recklessly disturbed', and his own time, where 'nimble fingers' are busy 'mechanically translating thought into metal' (Shand 240). Pre-Gutenberg, he insists, '[t]here was no wear-and-tear of the mental fibres, and, consequently, there were none of those painful brain and nerve diseases that fill our asylums' now (236). It is not incidental that Emma is an avid reader and also a neurotic. Flaubert, like Shand, shows us how conditions of reading changed as production levels rose. Where reading had once been a fever (such as the famous Werther-fever) as easily caught as any contagious disease, by the mid-nineteenth century reading is experienced as a shock to the nervous system, linked to information overload, sensory assault and 'mental overcharge' (Richardson 162) – in short, to the experience of modernity.

Concomitantly, affective response underwent a critical de-evaluation in theories of reading, changing from a prestigious descriptor of the structure of feeling in the neo-Longinian sublime to a devalued descriptor of particular feminized responses to the sentimental novel, the Gothic, Melodrama, and sensation fiction. While affective reading has never disappeared as a *practice of reading*, as book clubs testify (see Radway, *Feeling*), its association with a vulgar pleasure of the senses (Bourdieu's 'taste of sense') eventually led to its demise altogether in *theories of reading*. Meritorious in ancient times, dangerous in the hey-day of the novel, affective, bodily responses are paid little attention in contemporary reader-oriented theories. The dominant paradigm continues to be based on the 'taste of reflection', what Pierre Bourdieu (6) calls a 'pure pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure'; that is, reading devoid of passion: distanced, dispassionate, disinterested. This hierarchical division has left a lasting legacy, since affect is now relegated to those who *merely* read like a woman (and not like a scholar, see Berggren 167), or to those who *merely* read genre fiction (and not high modernist texts, see Radway, *Reading*).

Affective reading is not just devalued under a neo-Kantian paradigm, but actively resisted. The sheer number of resisting readers in contempo-

rary critical discourses (for a summary, see Littau 127–142) is a testament to this legacy, as is the virtual absence of non-resisting readers. For the resisting reader, the pleasure of reading is cognitive, not affective, a negative pleasure insofar as it is realised in the distance from the text required in order to recognise its ideological traps, without falling victim to them. Reading here is self-assertion and a confirmation of agency. Important as this work was in the early phases of feminism, and continues to be now, maybe the time has come to revisit the affective pleasures of reading which the Emma Bovarys enjoyed, and which Radway and Berggren describe as having been driven from them by the academy.

One way of doing this would be to re-examine the history of reading practices from the perspective of an affects tradition. Another way would be to attend to theories of affective reading, plunder and claim them on behalf of feminism; as in many respects Cixous does in her somatics of reading which proposes a ‘non-resisting relationship’ between text and reader (Cixous, *Reading* 3). An archeology of affect might allow us not just to overcome the ‘fear of feeling’, which Felski has addressed in her contribution on the visceral pleasures involved in reading (Felski, *Literature* 23–56, 56), but also re-position the coordinates between affect, gender and history. Affective reading need not be a descriptor of a practice negatively referred to as ‘reading like a woman’, but lends itself to be re-coded as a gendered mode of reading in the interests of the feminine. After all, to read affectively is to read passionately, and to read without passion is to read according to the strictures of reason, distance, mind, namely those categories historically conceived ‘as transcendence of the feminine’ (Lloyd 104), and therefore associated with the masculine. It follows that to read affectively is neither, essentially, to read like a woman, nor to read like a common reader, but to read in a manner at odds with the *purely* rational, the *strictly* definable, the *only* knowable.

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