Call for Contributions to Edited Collection

A Feel for the Text: Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice

Ever since Massumi posited the autonomy of affect and Sedgwick called for us to pay more attention to the felt “texture” of experience, there has been a surge of interest across the humanities and social sciences in how we are affected by and affect our environments. Affect theorists share an interest in the contingencies of being and in a model of becoming, offering an ontology that accounts for the complexities of lived experience and that promises a space for freedom resistant to the prisonhouse of discourse, to normative ideology, to state thinking.

So far little work has emerged that applies the insights of affect theory to literary analysis or that appraises the usefulness of affect theory to the literary critic. Aiming to address this gap, this collection seeks essays that consider the explanatory power affect theory might offer us. What are the contours of affective experience captured in literary texts, the intensities of embodied being that often escape the attention of the critic? What are the limits of representation, especially as regards fictional characters by definition removed from the quickenings of affect that impinge on physical bodies? What are the sensual resonances, the aesthetic engagements, the affective investments of readers and writers? What identities, what affective assemblages—queer, hybrid, transnational—take shape in the spaces opened by heightened emotion? How might accounting for the circulation of affective energies deepen—or even move us beyond—the insights of cultural materialist, feminist, or postcolonial readings? If in the past decades criticism has been driven by a hermeneutics of suspicion, how might attending to affect open a way to a more hopeful critique? Finally, to what extent could or should a turn to affect supplant the turn to discourse, and what are the implications for political critique of calls to embrace a more reparative project by theorists who tend to conceive of affect as pre-personal, as non-representational, and thus as resistant to analysis?

Contributors are encouraged to consider the relevance of any strain of theory to literary analysis, to textual production, to print culture. History of emotions approaches in dialogue with affect theory (its current lights, its foundational figures) are most welcome, especially those that in historicizing earlier representations of impassioned bodies in literary texts offer perspective on conceptions of affect in circulation today.

Palgrave Macmillan has expressed initial interest in publishing this project as part of the new series “Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism.” Please email a 500 word abstract and brief cv as attachments to stephen.ahern@acadiau.ca by 1 October 2015.

Stephen Ahern
Professor of English
Acadia University