RRR
Romance, Revolution & Reform

Editorial: Feeling in the Long Nineteenth Century

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> [I]s feeling possible where nothing is felt; and if the mind does not feel the feeling, what does it feel? Should it be urged that our whole mental life consists in a series of fleeting sensations and ideas, that we cannot tell whence they come nor whither they go; that we do not know whether they have objects or whether they have none, and that therefore we are not warranted to conclude that there is anything but sensations and ideas in the universe; that in these is our whole knowledge.[1]

FEELING AND ITS discontents have their own complicated history in the long nineteenth century, one which is deeply embedded in the social, philosophical, religious, scientific and literary dynamics of the period. From debates over passion and reason in the eighteenth century, to Freud's super-ego and id in the early-twentieth, the period demonstrates an unprecedented preoccupation, especially in its range and prevalence, with the forms and functions of feeling. In the course of the century, feelings went through many names – passions, sentiments, affections, emotions – each with their own inflection of meanings and uses.[2] These steady attempts at classification ultimately affirmed the conceptual fluidity of feeling and typically turned as a result towards the more workable matter of its management. Feelings could be both usefully harnessed and spin dangerously out of control.[3]

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[1] John Cunningham, 'Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*', *The Edinburgh Review*, 124 (July 1866, 120-150 (p. 126).

[2] See Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[3] For overviews of the social benefits and dangers of feeling in the period see Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000) and Gesa Stedman, *Stemming the Torrent: Expression and Control in the Victorian Discourses on Emotion, 1830-1872* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) respectively.

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The extract above comes from John Cunningham's review of John Stuart Mill's *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865) in *The Edinburgh Review*. It represents the view of one of the century's most influential thinkers, writing in one of its most influential publications. It is an intervention in a very specific debate against idealism, but it also asserts the wider dominance of feeling as a system of knowledge. In doing so, it foregrounds the kind of epistemological anxieties – reflected in the form of that second sprawling question which in its confusion becomes a sentence – that feeling provoked for mid-nineteenth century thinkers. The movement towards materialism and developments in nineteenth-century psychology would go some way to solving the practicalities of these questions with regard to the mind-body problem, but the possibilities of feeling would remain endlessly fascinating to theorists across the sciences and humanities; both then and now.[4]

My choice of extract also serves a pedagogical purpose. It showcases the ways in which studies of feeling have always been and must continue to be engaged in a cross-disciplinary web of enquiry, 'in the encounter with words, worlds, people, animals, and a variety of things'.[5] The set of questions that emerges for Cunningham (a historian) as a challenge to his source materials (philosophical treatises) around the absence of feeling – what happens when 'nothing is felt' – have recently received powerful critical reappraisal. Works like Wendy Ann Lee's *Failures of Feeling: Insensibility and the Novel* (2019) and Xine Yao's *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (2021), which explore the challenge unfeeling or feeling otherwise poses to the biopolitics of feeling, continue to push modern studies of affective experience in the period in new directions.

This kind of scholarship requires a certain degree of humility, an embracing of that 'we do not know', and a revaluation of what we do. Sketching out a particular

[4] Research groups in affective neuroscience retain their presence at top academic institutions including UCL, Oxford (OCEAN), Dartmouth, Harvard (CARE) and Rice, while The Max Planck Institute in Berlin, QMUL, Manchester and Melbourne continue to attract researchers in the history of emotions.

[5] Lauren Berlant, '*The Hundreds*, observation, encounter, atmosphere, and world-making', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 18.3 (2019), 289-304 (p. 290).

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aspect of Mill's philosophy of mind, Cunningham is the first to admit that 'we have had the greatest difficulty in understanding it'.[6] Studies of feeling are enshrouded in difficulty, but difficulty can be a productive starting point. As Leon Hughes writes in the first article in this issue, we might not be able 'to account for the actual emotional experience of late eighteenth-century readers' but we can grapple with 'the socio-political effects' of such feelings. The ineffability of feeling itself demands critical reorientation; it necessitates creative workarounds, or that we ask different questions.

In inviting papers on 'feeling' in the broadest sense this issue upholds the commitment recently articulated by the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader 2* to 'an abundance of pluri-affective imaginaries'.[7] By insisting on the active aspect of the term – 'to perceive or be affected by', *OED* v.1a – I wanted to encourage a range of approaches to feeling, historical and theoretical alike, and to show in the process that these need not be mutually exclusive.[8] This has made for a deliberately eclectic issue, in which these various imaginaries touch across spatio-temporal as well as disciplinary boundaries. Thus we start in the midst of the French Revolution and end with the age of polar exploration, moving across different moments, media and methodologies. Despite this temporal and thematic range, many connections readily arise between the papers in this issue. At the widest level, they all deal with narratives of feeling: political and personal, biographical and aesthetic, writerly and readerly, unifying and isolating. While these, too, are permeable boundaries, they speak to the ongoing importance of relationality to affective meaning-making.

In his article on the print images published in the major revolutionary newspaper *Révolutions de Paris* between July 1789 and February 1794, Leon Hughes foregrounds

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[6] Mill replies to this point in a letter, which Cunningham incorporates into his preface to *A New Theory of Knowing and Known: With Some Speculations on the Border-land of Psychology and Physiology* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1874).

[7] Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), p. 6.

[8] The definition evokes Spinoza's *affectus*, and later Massumi's affect, as 'an ability to affect and be affected'. Brian Massumi, introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xvi.

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the role of a neglected medium in a well-known narrative. Hughes argues that the editor of the *Révolutions*, Louis-Marie Prudhomme, not only wrote, but 'visually script[ed] the quasi-mythological origin story of the early Revolution'. More than this, Prudhomme's careful construction of the prints became a significant tool in the process of 'sentimental discipling': teaching his audience how to feel, or at least how to display their feelings, towards events ranging from the 1790 Fête de la Fédération to the executions of the Capets in 1793. As Hughes demonstrates, the projected affective responses to these events were not straightforward, but much like Prudhomme's favourite representational device, the crowd, unstable and at times ambiguous.

If Hughes alerts us to the ways in which these prints 'worked to produce and orient revolutionary bodies-in-space', Eric Tyler Powell focuses on the making of one particular body: Percy Bysshe Shelley's. In his article on the reception of Shelley after his death, Powell argues that a 'blurring of textual and physical bodies is central to nineteenth-century criticism of Shelley's poetry'. As Powell shows, Shelley's critics and defenders alike converged in their reading of the poet as 'hypersomatic'. This reading drew on the contemporary language of associationism, a mind science that appealed especially to Mill's idealist tendencies. Whether framed as a fine impressionability or diseased sentimentality, Powell argues that 'the construction and diagnosis of Shelley's physical body authorized the lyricisation of his body of poetry', divorcing it from his more radical body of work. Thus Powell exposes the political tensions underlying the criticism of Shelley in the period 1824-1840, while calling more broadly for a revaluation of the ways in which subsequent generations of critics continue to be affected by this legacy.

Jemma Stewart's article also digs below the surface narratives of feeling. Focusing on the 'language of flowers' books popular throughout the nineteenth century, marketed chiefly at women looking to conduct their romantic affairs through the art of floriography, Stewart asks: 'Was there a community of feeling between the authors and readers of this genre?' Stewart's close attention to paratextual material in her case studies reveals the variety of ways in which these books were used 'to strengthen or establish connections, to negotiate or communicate feelings'. Through

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the dedications, quotations and even original poetic compositions prefixed to these books in the process of gift-giving, Stewart argues that 'these connections regularly fell outside of the sphere of romance, occurring most often between women and hinging on feelings of friendship, familial love, even grief and mourning'. The reflections of the author on their own role as collector of these anthologies attest to the enduring affective power of material objects.

In the final two articles, a need for narrative-making emerges in particular around experiences of grief and mourning, though not all would put in words the grief they felt. Claire Cock-Starkey's article on the persistence of folkloric beliefs surrounding the rural deathbed in the nineteenth century showcases 'a diversity of behaviours and beliefs that challenge the totalising stereotypes of dying and grieving largely gleaned from urban settings'. The piece explores a number of recurrent customs recorded by nineteenth-century folklorists in their observations of rural working-class communities, from those practices believed to delay or hasten the moment of death, to those enacted after death had taken place. These rituals, Cock-Starkey argues, allowed 'the living to feel some power and agency over the fate of their loved one's spirit and offered a way to practice emotion through embodied actions', with structure and tradition offering a comforting counterpoint to the volatility of feeling.

Taking us into the early twentieth century, Deborah Wood examines the additional difficulty of managing private grief in the face of public mourning. In light of recent historical attention paid to the women left behind in the 1914 *Terra Nova* Antarctic expedition, Wood's article focuses on the divergent experiences of two widows, Kathleen Scott and Lois Evans, in the immediate wake of their husbands' deaths. Wood highlights the acts of 'emotional labour' this required from both widows, acts 'unquantifiable and incomparable to one another due to the radically different circumstances that these families found themselves in'. The article allows us to think in new ways about how to deal with archives that are often structured to exclude the evidence of affective experience. Wood concentrates in particular on the press campaign which defined the experience of Evans's family, allowing them no 'chance to construct a personal memory, nor to take any control or ownership over his legacy'.

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Wood's contribution serves an important reminder that who is permitted to feel what, when and in what way continues to be shaped by conceptualisations of (among others) gender, class and regional identity.

All six of the articles in this issue of *Romance, Revolution and Reform* offer up new material or bold re-visitings of prints, essays, books, records, diaries, letters, reports and photographs in their attempt to partially re-construct the myriad narratives of feeling in the long nineteenth century. Unlike the Victorians, their authors are less interested in uncovering the psycho-physiological workings of feeling on an individual level – 'whence they come and wither they go' – and more in their sometimes explicitly palpable, sometimes quieter workings across various socio-political channels. The wealth of original material and insight they bring together in these pages is further proof that the study of feeling in all its forms is more than another academic trend. It is my hope that in the same way these articles explore the site of encounter between bodies, objects and theories, this issue can spark new encounters with feeling for its readers.

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