

A Brief Analysis of the Development of Literary Emotion Studies

Yaohong Gao

Ningxia University, Yinchuan Ningxia, 750021

Abstract: This paper traces a concise genealogy of emotion studies in Western thought, showing how emotion moved from the margins of rationalist paradigms back to the center of humanities research and culminated in the early twenty-first-century “affective turn.” It then maps two dominant pathways: (1) the Spinoza–Deleuze–Massumi philosophical-ontological line, which conceptualizes affect as embodied intensity and relational becoming prior to codified emotion; and (2) the Tomkins–Sedgwick–Berlant–Ahmed feminist line, which explains how affect/emotion is scripted, regulated, and circulated within social norms and power structures. Finally, the paper argues that these approaches collectively redirect literary studies from representing feelings to analyzing mechanisms of affect production and its cultural-political embeddedness.

Keywords: affective turn; genealogy of emotion studies

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In the trajectory of Western academia, the study of emotion has long been marginalized under the influence of Descartes’ rationalist paradigm. Within the Cartesian tradition of “I think, therefore I am,” rationality was regarded as the core of human identity, while emotion was often dismissed as an uncontrollable, inferior reaction—an interference to sound judgment rather than a legitimate object of inquiry. However, with paradigm shifts such as the linguistic turn and the cultural turn in the latter half of the twentieth century, the humanities began to re-examine emotion, gradually repositioning it from the margins to the center of scholarly attention. Accordingly, this section outlines both the historical development and recent trends in emotion studies.

1. The Historical Trajectory of Emotion Studies

Emotion, as a fundamental aspect of human experience, has a research lineage that spans philosophy, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and other disciplines, making its theoretical evolution remarkably intricate. From the ancient Greek debates over reason and desire to the twenty-first-century “affective turn,” emotion has been reconceptualized from an individual’s subjective feeling to a complex structure shaped by social norms, cultural codes, and power relations. This section traces the key transformations in scholarly understandings of emotion in a chronological manner.

In Western philosophical tradition, emotion first appeared under the terms passion or affectus, typically contrasted with reason. Plato emphasized a tripartite model of the soul and argued that rationality must govern emotion and desire to achieve harmony in the ideal state (Plato, 2004). In contrast, Aristotle offered a more positive view in *Rhetoric*, maintaining that emotions play a regulatory role in ethical action and are indispensable for virtuous behavior (Aristotle, 1991). The Stoics, however, considered emotion a non-rational disturbance of the soul, advocating for its control through reason to attain the ataraxia, or emotional tranquility. This reason-emotion dichotomy persisted into the modern era. During the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas integrated classical thought with Christian theology, defining emotion as “the soul’s sensory activity” that must be regulated by faith and reason (Aquinas, 2006). Descartes, in *The Passions of the Soul*, described emotion as a passive response of the soul to bodily influences, insisting it must be disciplined by rational thought (Descartes, 1989). Such dominant perspectives entrenched emotion within a binary framework of rational versus non-rational, laying the cognitive foundation for viewing emotion as subordinate to reason.

The Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century marked a critical shift in the study of emotion. Rather than focusing on suppressing or disciplining emotion, scholars began to emphasize its foundational role in social and moral life. David Hume, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, asserted that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions,” highlighting that emotion—not reason—is the true driver of human behavior, and that sympathy

serves as the primary mechanism for human interaction and the basis for moral judgment (Hume, 2000, p. 415). Building on Hume's idea of sympathy, Adam Smith systematically developed this concept in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, proposing that empathy operates as an imaginative emotional transposition through which humans, by "placing ourselves in the situation of the other," develop social norms and moral awareness (Smith, 2002, p. 13–15). Similarly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized the primacy of emotion in human nature, arguing that "empathy" is an innate instinct that prevents individuals from harming others and forms the psychological foundation of the social contract and ethical behavior (Rousseau, 2004). Collectively, these perspectives positioned emotion as a cornerstone of social relations and moral judgment, laying the groundwork for modern theories of social emotion.

By the late 19th century, emotion studies began to shift from philosophy and sociology toward psychology. The James–Lange Theory proposed that emotion originates from the body's physiological response to external stimuli, fundamentally challenging the traditional model that emotions arise from conscious awareness and establishing the basis for the embodied theory of emotion in psychology (James, 1884). As the Chinese scholar Jin Wen aptly summarized: "We do not blush because we feel ashamed; rather, we feel ashamed because we blush" (Jin, 2020, p. 44). Concurrently, psychoanalysis, spearheaded by Sigmund Freud, engaged deeply with emotion. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud argued that emotions repressed by social norms re-emerge through mechanisms such as "conversion" and "displacement" (Freud, 1900/2010, p. 607). In his model of the psyche, the id harbors primal emotional impulses, which the superego suppresses through moral internalization, leading to the formation of neuroses (Freud, 1923/1961). This stage emphasized the unconscious and bodily foundations of emotion, providing crucial theoretical tools for the social turn in 20th-century emotion theory.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the "linguistic turn" and the rise of structuralism temporarily excluded emotion from mainstream academic inquiry. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) coined the concept of the "affective fallacy," criticizing readers for allowing their emotional responses to interfere with textual interpretation, thus arguing that emotion disrupts rational analysis. Nevertheless, feminist scholarship renewed their focus on emotion. Ngai (2005), in *Ugly Feelings*, highlighted how so-called "low-intensity emotions" such as boredom, fatigue, and awkwardness carry repressed social structures and maintain subtle but persistent political tension, revealing the potential for emotional resistance against modern capitalism and gender hierarchies (Ngai, 2005, pp. 6–7, 254–255). Meanwhile, Silvan Tomkins' "script theory of affect" provided a significant integrative framework. He argued that emotion is not merely a physiological reaction but becomes internalized through repetitive experiences, forming a set of social scripts that function as motivational systems within culture (Tomkins, 1995). This body of work gradually moved emotion back to the center of cultural criticism and laid theoretical groundwork for the later "affective turn."

Throughout history, the trajectory of emotion studies has not followed a linear path but has instead evolved through alternating emphases on ethical philosophy, psychophysiological mechanisms, and cultural critique. From Aristotle's ethical view of emotion and Descartes' mind-body dualism to the psychophysiological models of James and Tomkins, scholars have progressively developed a historically and socially grounded understanding of emotion. It is upon this accumulated theoretical foundation that the "affective turn" of the early 21st century emerged, providing robust academic support and further driving systematic explorations of emotion across fields such as literary criticism, anthropology, and political science.

2. Two Pathways of the Affective Turn

Since the late 20th century, academic research has progressively expanded its focus from language, representation, and structure to encompass the body, perception, and lived experience. This shift gave rise to what Patricia Clough termed the "affective turn" (Clough & Halley, 2007, p. 1). Within current mainstream scholarship, the affective turn generally manifests in two representative research pathways: "first, the Spinoza–Deleuze–Massumi philosophical-ontological approach to affect theory; and second, the feminist affect theory developed by Silvan Tomkins, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Lauren Berlant" (Du, 2020, p. 117). These two pathways differ in theoretical

starting points, research focus, and scholarly methods, thus shaping distinct paradigms within literary studies.

The Spinoza–Deleuze–Massumi line constitutes the first key pathway in affect theory, emphasizing the relationship between affect and the body. In *Ethics*, Spinoza portrayed the body as an entity whose “motion or rest is determined by that of another body, and so on to infinity,” highlighting the body’s openness to relational encounters (Spinoza, 2017, p. 57). He further asserted that affect is as “affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained” (Spinoza, 2017, p. 96). Building on this, the body becomes the principal site for the emergence and transformation of affect. Deleuze inherited and extended Spinoza’s ideas, understanding affect as “a transition or passage from preceding state to current state”—a generative force whereby the body continuously senses, responds, and reconfigures itself within a relational network (Deleuze, 2001, p. 59). He distinguished between “affections” (static conditions) and “affects” (the flow of force), arguing that becoming is not mere repetition but involves “actively drawing new joyful perceptions from new common notions,” thereby propelling the body toward greater capacities for action (Wang, 2016, pp. 10–16). Building on this tradition, Massumi, in *Parables for the Virtual*, differentiated between affect and emotion. He defined affect as the body’s instinctive response to stimuli, referencing the physiological and psychological processes that constitute “a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another,” a phase “before emotion takes shape” (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). Emotion, by contrast, is affect captured and coded by ideas, serving as a cultural and social expression. In sum, this pathway demonstrates that affect is not merely the expression of an internal psychological state but rather a dynamic enactment of the body’s engagement with external forces through flow, contact, and becoming. Under this theoretical lens, emotions in literary texts can thus be understood as the dynamic force of the body interacting with its environment, providing insight into the causes and mechanisms of character emotions and their transformations.

The second pathway focuses on the social structural nature of emotion and its cultural construction processes. Its theoretical foundation lies in the systematic research of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who identified nine basic affects as constituting a “drive system” and developed the “script theory of affect,” arguing that an individual’s repetitive affective experiences accumulated through social interactions form specific scripts that are constantly invoked in everyday behavior, thereby imbuing affective experience with social dimensions and cultural extensibility (Tomkins, 1995, p. 34). Building on Tomkins’ theory, literary scholar Eve Sedgwick expanded the significance of affect within gender and queer theory. She contended that affect is not merely an internal experience but rather “a regulatory mechanism of normative social order” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 38). Focusing particularly on the emotional dynamics of shame and desire, Sedgwick proposed the concept of “queer performativity,” providing Tomkins’ framework with an interpretive turn within literary hermeneutics (Ahern, 2024, p. 97). Her work emphasized the link between affect and identity, thus opening a pathway for analyzing power relations within affect studies. Lauren Berlant further advanced this structural analysis of affect to a broader socio-historical level by positing that “affect is a social coordinating mechanism,” introducing concepts such as “national sentiment” and “public intimacy” to reveal how affect serves a foundational role in the construction of nationhood, culture, and ethnicity under specific historical conditions. Sara Ahmed argues that affect is not an inner state but rather “a mechanism of circulation within society” that “sticks” to specific objects, thereby shaping the order of public emotions, social boundaries, and the sense of group belonging (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11). Her notion of “affective orientation” emphasizes that emotions generate inclusion and exclusion by “moving towards something,” explaining how affect becomes a mode of political and cultural construction. Therefore, within literary studies, this second pathway of the affective turn primarily illuminates how literary texts use affect to represent social norms, identity formation, and cultural exclusion, thereby expanding the theoretical boundaries of feminist, queer, and biopolitical criticism.

Under the influence of both pathways, literary research has gradually shifted from the mere representation of emotions to an inquiry into the mechanisms of affect generation and its embeddedness in cultural structures. Internationally, Wan-Chuan Kao (2019) combined Tomkins’ “shame–surprise script” with Massumi’s “fourth person

perspective,” proposing how affect configures a “pre-modern queer futurity” within narrative structures, thus bypassing the traditional binary opposition of emotion (Kao, 2019, p. 26). Similarly, Kang (2022), in her study of Italo Calvino’s novels, pointed out that the “you” narrative form produces contextual dislocation and perceptual confusion, leaving readers “unable to decode the text and forced to grope within it,” exemplifying Deleuze’s concept of “affective encounter” (Kang, 2022, p. 52). Ahern, examining Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, highlighted how characters under intense emotional stimulation exhibit bodily disruptions such as blushing, collapsing, and fainting, thereby demonstrating the theoretical insight of “affect as disruption”—that affect breaks ordinary experience and creates a modal rupture (Ahern, 2024, p. 100). In China, emotion studies have also developed unique interpretive trajectories within local contexts. Jin Wen identified two major theoretical approaches: the “theories of immediate emotion,” which posit that emotion has a judgmental function that can be directly perceived and understood by the subject; and the “theories of mediated emotion,” which hold that emotion is an experience mediated by language, culture, and social norms, and therefore cannot be directly integrated by consciousness (Jin, 2020, p. 147). Wang Min’an, through philosophical analysis, revealed the essence of affect as the fluidity of emotion, arguing that affect plays an important role in interpersonal relations, such as building communities through emotional contagion (e.g., shared codes of loyalty or political charisma)(Wang, 2017). Liang Fujiang, in the context of the “affective turn” and “cognitive turn,” examined Hogan’s construction of “affective narratology,” noting that “the object of literary emotion studies is no longer limited to character affect or reader response but also includes AI simulation of human emotions and the entanglement between humans and non-humans (AI)” (Liang, 2021, p. 149). This theoretical framework thus offers a new perspective for literary affect studies. This overview shows that literary studies of emotion have evolved into a multidimensional field that extends beyond textual representation.

With the advancement of the affective turn, the influence of emotion studies within the humanities, both domestically and internationally, continues to grow, establishing it as a core dimension for understanding socio-cultural interactions.

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