

Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol.

Adam Frank

New York: Fordham UP, 2015

186 pages.

Feelings move. We know this, and yet naming that movement is tricky. We rely on familiar descriptions—happiness is contagious, sadness floods over one—to articulate the force and flow of feelings. But the effects and accretions of these affective movements is, perhaps, where the most interesting exchanges occur. Further, in the field of critical literary studies, familiar frameworks are reanimated by affect theory. Take poetics, for example, which has traditionally been understood as a mode of literary theory predicated on analyzing form. An affective reading of poetics, however, reorients our critical eye to force. An affective understanding of poetics makes room for the reader to focus on a text’s movement, trace, and transfer. If feelings move, an affective understanding of poetics is a method for articulating the form, function, and force of those moving feelings. This is Adam Frank’s foundational claim in his recent publication *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol*.

In *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol*, Adam Frank argues that the work of four American writers most clearly elucidate what he calls *transferential poetics*; or, an “acutely receptive and reflexive attention to the movement of feelings across and between text and reader, or composition and audience” (Frank, 2015: 1). Since the affective turn, much scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which affective force might be both identified and articulated in literary and other modes of cultural production. Frank’s contribution marks a significant addition to this growing archive of theory. The writers under study—Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Andy Warhol—have been curated for their own attentiveness to the modes, mechanics, and technologies of moving feelings from the writer, to the page, to the reader. Building on the thinking of Silvan Tomkins and the object-relations theory of Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, Frank sketches out a vocabulary aimed at nuancing the “compositional force” and “audience response” with the aim of improving criticism with a specific focus on poetics. The work of Poe, James, Stein, and Warhol are studied individually, but when considered together, Frank offers innovative approaches to the study of media and performance. The apparatus that binds these disparate writers and thinkers is a poetic one, and Frank describes his own understanding of poetics as “those guiding ideas, theories, or phantasies of how writing (and other aesthetic work) may touch or make contact with an audience” (Frank, 2015: 2).

Frank’s notion of poetics diverges from the standard dictionary definition in that compositional force—that which harnesses a kind of desire for the ways in which an audience may respond to a work—allows him to underscore the ways in which a rhetoric of poetics always already assumes a preoccupation with and valuation of the emotional force of emotional connection and disconnection.

Erin Wunker

Drawing most specifically on the work of American psychologist Silvan Tompkins, Frank describes his understanding of affect theory as something that allows us to “organize and navigate” individual emotional lives through a process of selection, amplification, and consideration. By amplifying a specific affect, Tompkins argues, one is then able to determine a set of strategies for dealing with one’s feelings. Frank’s notion of transferential moments, then, draws both on the psychoanalytic notion of transference and on Tompkins’s method of “inverse archeology,” which is an “attention to how affect is at once individual and private and social and shared non-verbal communication” (p. 7). Frank explains that Tompkins’s inverse archeology is built on his understanding that affect functions as a hinge that works in both an inward and outward fashion. This simultaneous opposite action—feelings moving both privately and publicly—allows Frank to push beyond the prevailing reliance on the language of binary opposition:

This book’s method suggests that paying close attention to transferential moments, as well as to the poetics that aim for such moments, can be particularly telling of the hinges between levels of experience, a method that I describe as ... compositional. (p. 8)

Frank’s poetic-affective apparatus takes as foundational that, 1) there is always a reason for writing (“composition is always motivated”); 2) writing has an aim (“compositions always seek to touch a reader or audience in some manner”); and 3) the aims of writing can manifest in myriad ways (“such contact can take many forms”). Frank reins in this broad overview by noting that writers whose works can be characterized by “negative or perverse contact” populate his archive.

The book is broken into five chapters. “Thinking Confusion: On the Compositional Aspect of Affect” sketches the theoretical and critical methodology; “Expression and Theatricality, or Medium Poe” positions Poe as a manipulator extraordinaire. Henry James is considered alongside and through Wifred Bion as constructing a transferential poetics par excellence, while Gertrude Stein, the lone woman writer considered here, is read as a hinge from media to performance. It is Warhol’s poetic manipulations of the emergent technology of television that rounds out the manuscript. Frank’s theoretical “juxtapositions” are informed by and homage to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s project *Touching Feeling* (2003) which aims to “explore some ways around the topos of depth or hiddenness, typically followed by the drama of exposure, that has been a staple of critical work of the past four decades” (Sedgwick, 8). Frank’s juxtapositional approach is itself performing transferential poetics: the reader bumps up against the writer’s aims, informants, mentors, and methods, and in the process gets a glimpse of the work of writing and thinking, rewriting, and feeling one’s way through the work of another.

The conclusion, “Out and Across,” is brief and swerves wonderfully away from Warhol’s (tele)vis-à-vis to an anecdote about the American composer Morton Feldman. Frank relays a seminar Feldman gave about a lesson he received from the French composer Edgard Varèse who told Feldman to consider the time it takes for the music to leave the stage and reach the ears of the audience (p. 150). This anecdote harnesses Frank’s archive: Poe, James, Stein, and Warhol are writers and thinkers whose work is “out there, or more simply, out” (p. 150). Outness, for

Erin Wunker

Frank here, classifies an impossibility to classify, rather than having any relation to public presentation and performance of one's sexuality. Yet there is a performative component: "if the performer listens to the demands of the composition, then the audience may find itself doing something similar. This is another aspect of *out there* poetics: reception, or the act of listening, can re-create the space of composition" (p. 152). Paying attention is thus the hinge around which an affective poetics moves. Frank's assertion—that we can get close to that force of feeling, should we be attentive enough—beckons the reader to lean forward and listen.

Feldman, Morton. "The Future of Local Music." In *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, edited and with an introduction by B.H. Friedman. Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996.