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Rachel Greenwald Smith

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Affective Hypothesis

This book is an argument against the ubiquity of what I call the *affective hypothesis*, or the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience.¹ Like most commonly held beliefs, the affective hypothesis is so prevalent that it tends to function invisibly, silently supporting a range of critical practices: it lurks in reviews evaluating recently published novels, in critical appraisals of authors' hallmark styles, and in large-scale assessments of literary movements. And it is just as often employed by nonspecialists in literature, appearing in institutional appraisals of the value of literary study to a larger college curriculum and in justifications for the inclusion of literature departments in interdisciplinary initiatives. In all directions, among critics, scholars, administrators, and casual readers, there is an odd and unsettling consensus: We read works of literature because they allow us direct contact with individuals who are like us but not us; they allow us to feel what others feel; they provoke empathy; and they teach us how to understand what it means to be a unique human being.²

What could be wrong with that?

As it turns out, plenty. While the affective hypothesis is not a recent invention, it has found renewed support, particularly in scholarly circles, since the early 1990s. The contemporary prevalence of the affective hypothesis therefore coincides historically with the securing of neoliberalism as a political, economic, and cultural dominant in the United States.³ Neoliberalism began as a set of economic policies in the late 1970s and early 1980s aimed toward unfettering domestic and global markets, dismantling social safety nets, and privatizing previously public institutions. With the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Clinton presidency, neoliberalism began to look as if it could exist in perpetuity, uncontested from superpowers abroad or political parties at home.⁴ As a result, neoliberal policy has become increasingly normalized, accompanied by a corresponding shift in the social expectations that are placed

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upon individuals. Neoliberalism's emphasis on the necessity of personal initiative, along with its pathologizing of structures of dependence, calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system.

These subjective aspects of neoliberalism coincide startlingly with the assumptions underlying the affective hypothesis. While neoliberalism casts the individual as responsible for herself, the affective hypothesis casts feeling as necessarily owned and managed by individual authors, characters, and readers. Neoliberalism imagines the individual as an entrepreneur; the affective hypothesis imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return. The neoliberal subject is envisioned as needing to be at all times strategically networking; feelings, according to the affective hypothesis, are indexes of emotional alliances.

Like any structure of belief that functions without contestation, the affective hypothesis is both totalizing and limiting, stuffing diverse literary practices into a single mold and excluding those that don't conform to its shape. Works of literature highlight, intensify, and transmit feelings in a wide range of ways. Yet when it comes to defining a work as warm or cold, emotional or flat, alive or dead, or determining whether it functions on the level of the heart or the head, the affective hypothesis shuts out the multiplicity of textual approaches to feeling.

This book argues that the feelings that are acknowledged under the affective hypothesis are largely what I call *personal feelings*. Personal feelings function like personal property. They are private, not in the sense of being secret or interior, but in the sense of being "privatized": they are personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self; they are managed by the individual but they are augmented by connections with others; and ideally they enrich the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion.⁵

But there are also forms of textual feeling that tend to be overlooked in contemporary literary criticism because of the prevalence of the affective hypothesis. I call these *impersonal feelings*. Impersonal feelings do not straightforwardly conform to a market model, because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections. As a result, these modes of textual affectivity, if they are recognized and defined as forms of feeling, challenge the principles of subjectivity that underpin not only our aesthetic judgments but our economic, political, and social convictions as well.

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Emotional Economies

In her study *Poetic Justice*, Martha Nussbaum makes an impassioned argument for the political importance of the novel form by appealing to its privileged emphasis on the personal. In one of the more exemplary moments of the affective hypothesis, she praises the novel's

commitment to the separateness of persons and to the irreducibility of quality to quantity; its sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance; its commitment to describe the events of life not from an external perspective of detachment, as the doings and movings of ants and machine parts, but from within, as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives.⁶

In this view, the novel form provides a focus on the individual that society as a whole lacks. This focus is anchored in the emotional provocations of fiction, wherein “readers of novels . . . find themselves led by these works to fear, to grief, to pity, to anger, to joy and delight, even to passionate love.”⁷ For Nussbaum, the novel's attention to the emotional dimensions of human experience leads the form to be “profoundly opposed . . . to the reductive economic way of seeing the world.”⁸ If economic assessments rely on cold data and rational actors, the argument goes, the novel's warmth and interest in nonrational experiences should counter the tendency to evaluate human needs according to economic logics. Emotions, in this reading, accentuate the specificity of individual experience, and the feelings triggered by the reading of novels allow for readers to ethically invest themselves in the emotional specificity of characters just as they “invest their own lives.”

It may be true that traditional economic reasoning undervalues the role of emotions in decision making. And it may also be the case that certain forms of the novel do put great emphasis on individual emotional experience. But anchoring the political promise of the novel form in its ability to do so, as Nussbaum does, ignores the degree to which individualization is as key to how all forms of capitalism function as is rigid or unfeeling systemization.⁹ As social institutions, from welfare systems to educational systems, and from media sources to public spaces, increasingly become personalized and privatized, neoliberalism amplifies this tendency for capitalism to individualize, casting individuals as exclusively responsible for themselves.

Despite this coincidence between the logic of neoliberal capitalism and an emphasis on the personal, the contemporary trend toward seeing literature as offering an education in the uniqueness of the individual through

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an experience of emotional connection has been on the rise over the past twenty-five years. A range of new subfields in literary criticism, while methodologically diverse, tend to see literature as socially beneficial insofar as it provides evidence of the centrality of individual emotions. These include ethical appeals to literature's capacity to insist on the importance of the individual over and above the faceless mass; neurobiological efforts to understand literature as literal brain training for the individual reader; and approaches within trauma studies that see works of literature as performative utterances that, when read for their gaps, breaks, and incongruities, reveal the psychological state of their authors or narrators. This notion also underpins a range of recent trends in literary production that are envisioned as compromises between modernist experimentalism and the representation of the feeling subject, including the emergence of neo-realism and post-postmodernism in fiction and the post-language lyric in poetry. The ubiquity of these schools and styles, along with a publishing and review culture that celebrates them, furthers the tendency for fundamental literary meaning to be equated with the production of recognizable emotional content.

The appearance since the 1990s of approaches like these, which see literature as a means to an ethical encounter with the specificity of personal experience, stems from several related currents: the waning of postmodernism as a formal practice and aesthetic dominant; skepticism toward poststructuralism and deconstruction along with a more general decline of the study of theory as an autonomous subdiscipline; and increasing interest in themes and approaches that are seemingly more anchored in what is imagined to be authentic human experience. The turn away from linguistic modes of analysis and the move toward ontological concerns in particular is often used to justify interest in works of literature that appear to represent human experience realistically – that is, without self-conscious aestheticization or other distancing effects.¹⁰

While the recent turn to ethical and ontological literary criticism is commonly attributed to changes within the discipline of literary studies, less commonly considered is the historical coincidence of this shift with the consolidation of neoliberalism.¹¹ Championed by the administrations of Ronald Reagan in the United States, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Deng Xiaoping in China, neoliberalism initially emerged as a set of domestic and global policies aimed toward developing what David Harvey describes as “an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”¹² The fundamental neoliberal belief that “human well-being can best be

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advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” has since underpinned many of the policy changes that have characterized the past three decades, which include state-enforced limitations on the power of unions, the dissolution of social safety nets, the deregulation of financial institutions, the privatization of industry, and the development of international free trade agreements.¹³ These practices and priorities in the United States have been relatively stable and secure despite dramatic changes in the party affiliations of presidential administrations and congressional majorities, significant historical events including the 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and serial periods of economic recession and growth. This stability attests to the endurance and widespread acceptance of basic neoliberal beliefs in policy circles on both the right and the left.¹⁴ The resilience of neoliberalism despite these apparent challenges suggests that it is more than a set of policies aimed at responding to the needs of a given moment. Rather the foundational assumptions of neoliberalism have “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse,” appearing in a wide range of institutional and personal practices.¹⁵

As a result, the consequences of neoliberalism extend beyond the particularities of economic and political policy, affecting the assumptions that underlie political subject formation. As Jason Read argues, neoliberalism has been achieved “not by a transformation of *the mode of production*, a new organization of the production and distribution of wealth, but by the mode of subjection, a *new production of subjectivity*.”¹⁶ The social effects of neoliberalism therefore go beyond what can be understood through a purely economic analysis of financial indexes, market instruments, and production processes.¹⁷ This is because, as Wendy Brown explains, neoliberalism’s “effect on governance and the social is not merely the result of leakage from the economic to other spheres but rather of the explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality on these spheres” such that previously nonmarket-oriented forms of life become understood as best functioning according to a market logic.¹⁸ This form of market rationality transforms the subjective norms underlying liberalism, in which individuals were shaped on the one hand as citizen-subjects and on the other hand as economic subjects, with all of the tensions and contradictions that go along with this double role. Under neoliberalism, a model of the subject emerges that reconciles the contradictory commitments of democratic citizenship and capitalist competition by jettisoning the political demands of liberalism and retaining the economic imperatives of the liberal market.¹⁹

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While the emphasis this places on individual success and self-care does contribute to the much-discussed rise of individualism over the course of the past few decades, the neoliberal subject is not individualistic in the traditional sense. Neoliberal society requires and encourages engagement with others: it is, after all, under neoliberalism that we see the rise of social media and the premium put on networking and the acquisition of “friends.” But these forms of association are largely understood to lead to the enrichment of the self (as opposed to the company, family, or locality) such that the development of the self becomes the primary aim of social engagement. In this social context, emotions are increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage, rather than as instances of authentic experience that fall outside rational control. In the neoliberal context, recognizing the presence of emotions, in art, in other people, and in the self, does not challenge market-oriented thinking. Instead, feelings frequently become yet another material foundation for market-oriented behavior: emotions are acquired, invested, traded, and speculated upon.

Managing the Emotional Portfolio: The Case of *The Corrections*

The convergence of the economic and the emotional that occurs under neoliberalism appears thematically in a range of contemporary works of fiction. For instance, Jonathan Franzen satirizes the emotional consequences of neoliberal ideology in *The Corrections* through the character of Gary, a vice president of a local bank, who maps his mental health as if he were tracking stocks:

Although in general Gary applauded the modern trend toward individual self-management of retirement funds and long-distance calling plans and private-schooling options, he was less than thrilled to be given responsibility for his own personal brain chemistry, especially when certain people in his life, notably his father, refused to take such responsibility. But Gary was nothing if not conscientious. . . . He estimated that his levels of Neurofactor 3 (i.e., serotonin: a very, very important factor) were posting seven-day or even thirty-day highs, that his Factor 2 and Factor 7 levels were likewise outperforming expectations, and that his Factor 1 had rebounded from an early-morning slump related to the glass of Armagnac he'd drunk at bedtime. He had a spring in his step, an agreeable awareness of his above-average height and his late-summer suntan. His resentment of his wife, Caroline, was moderate and well contained. Declines led advances in key indices of paranoia (i.e., his persistent suspicion that Caroline and his two older sons were mocking him), and his seasonally adjusted assessment

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of life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed.²⁰

Gary manages his emotional life as if it were his stock portfolio: tracking gains in his neurochemistry, keeping a watchful eye on the "key indices" of his responses to those around him, and warding off any existential musings that might challenge the "robustness of his mental economy."²¹ His feelings are figured as personal assets, such that his responsibility for himself is understood to require the proper management of those assets. Gary, whose interest in the stock market is motivated by personal competitiveness as much as it is by economic necessity, is particularly prone to seeing his own neural portfolio as reflecting his moral character more than it does the contingencies of his environment or social context. While his emotions do stem from his relationships – he suffers throughout the novel from conflicted feelings about his nuclear family – those emotions are understood to be solely his responsibility to manage. Resentment is therefore seen as a threatening factor to be contained, rather than the result of an interpersonal dynamic that could change depending on a shifting external situation. Similarly, depression is seen not as a variation of emotional experience but as evidence of improper management of emotional resources; it is characterized as shameful evidence of unwise decisions and moral failings. This personalization of emotional life is consistent with Brown's argument that neoliberalism "carries responsibility for the self to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action."²² Consequentially, unhappiness and other emotional difficulties, regardless of their causes or contexts, are seen as evidence of an irresponsible abdication of responsibility for the self.²³

Franzen's satire of the culture of psycho-pharmaceuticals and neurology reflects how major technological and cultural changes in popular approaches to psychology have led to beliefs about mental health and psychology consistent with neoliberal assumptions. Central to the many changes in psychology that have occurred since the 1980s have been the development of more sophisticated neural imaging tools,²⁴ the emergence of a new generation of antidepressants,²⁵ and the growth of the self-help industry.²⁶ All of these factors have led to a shift in psychological theory and practice, in which the therapeutic model that dominated much of the twentieth century is increasingly replaced with the fantasy that individuals, armed with a pop-scientific knowledge of the brain, a Prozac prescription, and a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps attitude, might take full personal control of their emotional lives. Neoliberal policies have, in turn,

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supported this view by allowing for greater flexibility in the advertising of drugs to potential consumers. The FDA's 1997 deregulation of Direct to Consumer (DTC) advertising by pharmaceutical companies allowed prescription drugs to be advertised in broadcast and print media, which is likely to have contributed to a rise in psycho-pharmaceutical use. These advertisements often call upon individuals to seek out their doctors to obtain prescriptions for particular drugs rather than representing doctors as responsible for properly diagnosing and treating patients.²⁷ Prescription drug use since this ruling has therefore been based more directly on the model of commodity and consumption. In addition, neoliberal reforms in health insurance delivery in the 1980s and 1990s led to a rise in health management organizations (HMOs), which tended to restrict reimbursements for long-term psychotherapy. This perpetuated the rise of prescription-only, and thus often primarily self-monitored, mental health practices.

The Corrections includes moments of scathing writing on these and other emotional consequences of neoliberalism. Yet the parallels between personal experience and the economic logics that underlie neoliberalism extend beyond these satirical passages to the structure of the novel itself. In this aspect, the critical posture disappears, and what remains is an apparent acceptance of the notion that the economy and the personal function in tandem. While the title of the novel has valences that range from the penitentiary system (correctional facilities) to generational change (making corrections in the behavior of one's parents) to revision (the endless corrections that Chip, one of the main characters, makes to his doomed screenplay), the metaphor that looms most dramatically over the novel is that of the market correction, the dip that often occurs in the stock market after a dramatic rise. The market correction that Franzen addresses most directly in the novel is the end of the dot-com bubble in the NASDAQ, which caused most major market indices to slip beginning in the spring of 2000 and to continue to lose ground after the attacks of September 11, 2001, hitting a cyclical low after the publication of *The Corrections* in October 2002. Calling this dive, which was in progress and certainly not resolved at the time of the novel's publication, a "correction," as Franzen implicitly does, betrays the fundamental assumption that, in the long term, U.S. financial markets will function as they have for more than a century and continue to rise over time. This has historically been the case, even despite substantial losses like those that accompanied the Great Depression. In other words, what looks like a catastrophe in the short term, if the market functions as it has since the beginning

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of the twentieth century, becomes in the long term a mere momentary adjustment to otherwise predictable and steady growth.²⁸

The Corrections takes place immediately before the end of the dot-com bubble – the NASDAQ crash occurs only in the final section of the novel that serves as an afterword of sorts – but the shape of the market correction provides a foundation for the plot arcs of the lives of each of the Lambert children. Chip, Gary, and Denise, each with their own separate story told through their own primarily separate part of the novel, all start out moving upward in their lives according to most traditional standards of success. Chip is an assistant professor at a prestigious liberal arts college about to go up for tenure, Gary is a father of three with a lucrative job and a skyrocketing stock portfolio, and Denise is a star chef receiving local and national publicity. Over the course of the novel, each undergoes a major episode of degradation. Chip goes on a three-day drug-and-sex binge with an undergraduate and is fired from his academic job; Gary becomes so paranoid when his wife and children believe he is depressed that he gets drunk, serves the family raw meat, maims himself with hedging shears, and ultimately has to confess to a depression he may or may not in fact suffer; and Denise is caught in a double affair with both her boss and his wife. The three characters' lives each begin on a steep rise and then appear to plummet disastrously. By the end of the novel, however, each has, through a renewed commitment to wise self-management, reversed the trend and is on the way back up, albeit having undergone a "correction" toward more modest forms of success. Chip is married and expecting a child; Gary has a less robust financial profile but he is uneasily reconciled with his family; and Denise moves to Brooklyn and finds a job at a new, less flashy restaurant.

The fates of the three characters, in other words, mimic the behavior of the market under the assumption that it will, if properly managed, continue to rise over time. This reinforces the notion that any loss of value – whether in life or finance – is part of a natural process of growth and not a fundamental hindrance to the accumulation of greater value. Unlike the obvious satirical tone of the economic terms with which emotions are understood in Gary's section of the novel, the collapsing of life and finance in the overall structure of the novel is not self-reflexively critical. In fact, the degree to which the narrative structure of the work matches prevailing market expectations affirms the inevitability of those expectations and leaves the novel entirely subject to their logic. In other words, the comedic structure of *The Corrections* is dependent on its acceptance of a vision of the workings of both finance and human life consistent

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with the ideological bases of neoliberalism: the notion that independently generated upward movement is ultimately achievable and that problems along the way are likely to merely signal the end to an unusual bout of euphoria and a return to less spectacular but more predictable progress.

Not only does this reflect the belief in the self-moderating market that is foundational to the neoclassical economic theories that underpin neoliberalism, but when applied to characterization and plot it has the double effect of making the emotional lives of each individual appear to function like that self-moderating market – as working autonomously from the effects of the others who surround them. Many of the most humorous moments of the novel stem from the irony generated by each character's unawareness of every other's desperation. Early in the novel, for instance, Chip is so determined to impress his parents during their visit to New York that he steals expensive fillets of fish by putting them in the crotch of his leather pants while, unbeknownst to him, his mother is so preoccupied with her own overwhelming shame over her husband's creeping dementia that the quality of Chip's meal is the last thing on her mind. These moments of irony signal that the overall emotional story of the novel is the struggle each person goes through alone to "correct" themselves despite the various factors – familial, social, economic, and intellectual – that press upon them. In this sense, Sam Tanenhaus is right in his glowing assessment of *The Corrections* when he writes, "even as [Franzen's] contemporaries had diminished the place of the 'single human being,' Franzen, miraculously, had enlarged it."²⁹ Yet the consequence of this enlargement of the single human being in the novel is the diminishment of the network of associations that inform the relative successes and failures of each individual member of a family. The result is a novel that depicts the lives of individuals with specificity, represents their emotional lives in depth, and offers a plot that follows a familiar path of despair and renewal; yet at the same time it remains strangely tonally detached.³⁰ Tanenhaus's claim that the novel "cracked open the opaque shell of post-modernism, tweezed out its tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism" therefore relies on an odd conception of what "authentic humanism" entails. The assumption seems to be that a focus on the individual as a discrete actor is so paramount to the generation of "warmth" that it can be the litmus test for what it means to write novels that engage authentically with the human experience, even if that experience is highly scripted within prevailing economic narratives, and even if it neglects to engage with the contingency, context, and indeterminacy that tends to accompany emotional relationships.