**Position Paper:**

**Reading Feeling, Writing Timeliness**

To define a decade study of English literature by the milestones of the French Revolution is to implicitly stake a claim to a set of themes and contexts: the tension between sensibility and rationalism, as assessment of national identity and history, the role of the public sphere. Late eighteenth-century writers — and not just the radicals — were engaged with a project testing the uses of literature. Two contentious elements of literature, the complex and variable interrelationship of which my study foregrounds, are feeling and timeliness. Both concepts shape eighteenth century writing, and my approach to it. “Feeling” as a central idea refers both to the literature of sensibility as an evolving counterpoint to enlightenment rationalism, and to contemporary processes of reparative reading which foreground the limits of scholarly critique. “Timeliness” encompasses both the urgent responses of the eighteenth century mediascape to a perceived historical rupture, and to an exhaustively particular methodology of historicized textual study. Although my project remains quantitative and computational in its technological foundations, my central interest remains with the field of eighteenth century studies, rather than the field of the digital humanities.

# Reading Feeling

My readings have traced the development, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, of a complex negotiation regarding the role of feeling in the public sphere and in literature. Competing definitions of the effects of sympathy had high-stakes political and ethical implications: does universal sympathy unite all people into a moral society of citizens, or do emotional interpretations of events blind people to rational justice? When literature excites a strong emotional response, is this a healthy form of exercise for its audience’s moral feeling, or a weakening distraction from real moral action? These questions, in translated form, continue to shape my own questions about literature as a field: what should one read, and how should one read it, if one wishes to honor the importance of feeling without being misled by emotional manipulation?

The “major” works across the period are characterized by sentimental novels before the 1780s, to political philosophy and gothic novels during the 80s and 90s, to romantic poetry at the turn of the 19th century. My interest in the gothic and the supernatural is thus subsumed within a larger conversation about the representation of feeling. As Clery, Miles, and Gamer have explored in different ways, gothic and supernatural stories encompass a subset of literary strategies to understand and use feeling, which exist in conversation and competition with other strategies. Each work must strike its own balance between exciting the feelings of its readers, and moderating them. The simplest narrative tracing this development begins with a naive emotional philosophy of benevolence in sentimental novels, which gets exposed as flawed by the rationalist political philosophy of the 80s and 90s and must grapple with its failures in the gothic literature of that period, and which forms a new balance though elevation and retrospection in romantic literature.

Eve Sedgwick and, more recently, Rita Felski, among many others, have raised similar discussions about the role of emotional engagement and identification in literary scholarship. Sedgwick describes literary study which seeks to expose wide-reaching and harmful systems that underlie large bodies of works as “paranoid reading,” and introduces the idea of “reparative reading” as an alternative. However, just as eighteenth-century writers found it easier to expose the flaws in a particular mode of thinking than to articulate a satisfying substitute, Sedgwick produces a much more detailed description of paranoid reading than of its alternative. She nonetheless points to a guiding motivation of reparative reading, from which one can begin: “The desire of a reparative impulse... is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude to an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.” And she suggests an outcome of reparative literary scholarship, against which one can compare one’s findings: “What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture - even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.” The framework of reparative reading can thus be applied both to works of literature and to the reading practices which developed and around that literature.

Felski’s monograph promises a more resounding answer to Sedgwick’s tentative groundwork. *The Limits of Critique*, however, is centrally focused, as per its title, on current practices of critique and the limits of those practices. Its extended discussion (and, at points, critique) of the practice of critique highlights similarities between conversations about reading in the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. For example, when Felski hyperbolically lists the “unserious” reading practices which are presumed to be the only alternative to critique, “naive reading, sentimental effusion, impressionistic judgment, fuzzy-headed amateurism, and mere ‘chatter about Shelley’,” sentimentality is explicitly named alongside forms of ‘sloppy’ thinking that are presumed to be incompatible with rationality. The need to maintain rationality in the face of emotion takes on moral implications in Felski’s hyperbole as well: without critique, the question goes, “what will save us from perdition, what will keep us from committing all those sins we’ve been warned against,” what will keep us from being dangerously bad readers? Of course, part of Felski’s conclusion is that these forms of “bad reading” are not, despite their emotional contamination, morally wrong or intellectual vacuous — but like Sedgwick, she sketches her alternative lightly.

Both Felski and Sedgwick suggest a greater acknowledgement of what an eighteenth century writer might term the *interest* we have in the texts we study. For a story to be “interesting,” in the late eighteenth century, means not only that it is informative or narratively compelling, but that it makes a claim on the emotional investment of its audience. One is not only interested *in* others, but interested *for* others, with the potential of actively demonstrating that interest through social assistance. Felski describes this as “a judicious decrease rather than an increase of distance -- a willingness to acknowledge and more fully engage our attachments.” As a scholarly practice to demonstrate this closeness, Felski gestures towards what she terms “neophenomenology,” “a sustained attention to the sheer range and complexity of aesthetic experiences, including moments of recognition, enchantment, shock, and knowledge.” Felski has begun this work by establishing a greater richness for the vocabulary of “identifying” with characters. Determining whether a character is “relatable” enough to “identify with” is often a key concern for undergraduate readers and for 18thC thinkers: Felski distinguishes literary identification into at least three types, “structural or formal alignment, moral allegiance, and emotional empathy,” which could be useful for untangling the allegiance required of different works of sentimental literature. Felski thus begins to locate “post-critical, rather than uncritical” forms of “serious thinking” which could both shed light on and be modified by eighteenth-century practices.

The goal of this serious thinking, for Felski, is to remind us “that our institutions and ways of life, passions and prejudices, are not those around which past lives were organized” — a discovery which will “shock” us but also reinvigorate us, proving the necessary prerequisite to understand that future ways of life will also be organized differently. For Sedgwick, too, the possibility of “surprise” in a non-paranoid reading, the idea that even the most predictable past events could have unfolded differently, is crucial for imagining change in the future. Our response to this alterity, however, marks one of the major differences between current scholarly work to integrate feeling into our understanding, and eighteenth century discourses. The late eighteenth century, and particularly the period in the 1790s defined by the ongoing aftershocks of the French Revolution, saw a similar acknowledgement that “our institutions and ways of life, passions and prejudices” are not universal and invulnerable. Robert Miles is one of many to describe the impact of the French Revolution as centred less on individual events, and more on the alarming “historical rupture” which the revolution was seen to constitute. For many, this rupture represented an opportunity for optimism — but many more experienced the turmoil as near-apocalyptic, and even for optimists the sense of impending change was often uncomfortable. Miles argues that a widespread sense of profound change shaped far more than just political thought: “The sense of crisis … linked to the yawning question of what now did legitimate state authority, profoundly marks the literary production of the Romantic era. The Enlightenment modes that survive in the 1790s differ substantially from those that reappear ten and fifteen years later.” One way that these works were shaped by their context is a heightened sense of timeliness for published works.

# Writing Timeliness

Whether newly written or reprinted to meet new demand, texts take on shifting meanings as they are printed, reprinted, revised, and recontextualized over time*.* The changing impact of works over time is most obvious in overtly political works like Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, whose relationship with, for example, Helen Maria Williams’ *Letters from France* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was directly determined by the extent to which the works in question were considered to have been borne out by political events. But time-sensitive readings, and an expected textual responsiveness for current events, extended to literary works as well.

Novels which, in scholarly editions, give the illusion of being singular, unified objects are nearly all the result of a more complicated and responsive process of coming into being. As *Tristram Shandy* was composed and published, for example, each new installment slightly shifted its emphasis, so that the emerging narrative only gradually solidified into what are, in retrospect, its major concerns. Particularly notable is the way that volumes 7 through 9 of *Tristram Shandy*, written after the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, incorporate Gothic materials differently than the earlier volumes; rather than being one text with one interpretation of the role of the supernatural in heightening readerly emotion, *Shandy* was a phenomenon which unfolded and varied over time. Even works which were not printed in installments, like Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* and Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, could change in content and in popular reception with a new edition.

Similarly, *Lyrical Ballads* is often studied in the context of its 1798, 1800, and 1802 editions, but William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge seem to have been following standard poetic practice by writing new prefaces, selecting new poems, and re-editing their works for a new emphasis. Charlotte Smith enacts similar changes across the dozen editions of *Elegiac Sonnets* printed between 1784 and 1812. Smith’s 1797 edition, for example, includes a new preface, re-selects the non-sonnet poems, and adds new sonnets to create a “new” work out of poems which were as many as thirteen years old. The edition presents her as a politically engaged poet, directly relevant to the events of her day, whose radical philosophies are salient even in her earliest sonnets.

My interest in timeliness is not unprecedented. William St. Clair’s exhaustive bibliographical study of book prices and David Brewer’s reflection on the recent quantitative turn in literary studies both call attention to the limits of what St. Clair calls the “parade of authors” and “parliament of texts” models of literary history, and the need to account for what Brewer terms the “footprint” left by the ongoing impact of texts beyond their moment of initial publication. Both of these studies, and others like them, enrich our understanding of the immediate timely context of literary productions, particularly as expressed in the marketing and sale of texts to readers. Among Felski’s alternatives to critique, too, is Wai Chee Dimock’s concept of “resonance,” which takes Brewer’s “footprint” as the primary object of study to trace the “busy afterlife of the literary artifact” which “refutes our efforts to box it into a moment of origin.” This “busy afterlife” can be seen beyond the immediate material book history of the work’s editions, in the interplay between reading practices, audiences, and literary genres.

A particularly interesting text which might reward a study of both its timeliness and its use of feeling is Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, which was first published in 1766 but continued to be frequently reprinted in the 1790s. The persistence of *Wakefield* immediately undermines any literary history which wholly relegates the sentimental novel to the 1760s and 1770s. However, by the 1790s *Wakefield* is no longer competing with *The Man of Feeling* (which many of its former dedicated readers now regarded with embarrassment), and instead was read alongside the contemporary literature of sensibility in the Gothic mode. There is much still to be uncovered about how readers in the 1790s made very different sense of this work’s political and religious sermons, dramatic and moving prison scenes, and moralizing love-plot.

# The Digital Humanities

Timeliness and feeling, as investigated through bibliographical research and reparative reading, thus chart a tangled network of interrelated concepts. Reparative reading requires an openness to the multiplicity of meaning which works may accrue as they are printed, reprinted, revised, and adapted in response to the pressures of timeliness. Precise bibliographical research can recapture and contextualize the complex and variable strategies of feeling that competed throughout the period. Not yet integrated into this set of priorities and methodological frameworks is the element of my project which often requires the most justification: my use of quantitative and computational methodologies.

“Digital humanities” is often figured as a historical rupture of its own, one which calls into question past literary study and makes the future of the field impossible to predict. Adam Hammond uses his monograph to try to grasp the nature of the changes; more commonly, book-length criticism in the digital humanities take the form of edited collections, which accumulate many small snapshots of computationally-engaged research that only rarely attempt to theorize the whole. There are often common threads between these local strategies to maintain humanist and qualitative principles within individual computation projects, but even these are often seen as representing an intermediate stage. Bettina Fischer-Starke’s linguistics monograph, being totally embedded in the computational corpus analysis which now constitute linguistics itself as a field, presents an illuminating contrast to the hesitations and preoccupation with definitions and boundaries in self-identified “digital humanities” work.

Willard McCarty stands out for often producing short articles which simply accumulate vocabulary from other fields and present them for consideration. My past work has made extensive use of his definitions of models and prototypes; now, his chapter on interdisciplinary research strikes me as particularly fruitful. Willard McCarty says that “[t]he range of possibilities in interdisciplinary research is from theft to assimilation”: the current state of “digital humanities” research still involves a lot of theft. Digital humanists kidnap computational methods for their own, often-unrelated needs, but more dangerously, digital research often steals an aura of empirical objectivity from its proximity to “hard sciences.” The aura of objective truth carried by graphs and tables — an aura which is actively cultivated by many digital humanities practitioners, especially Franco Moretti — is an illusion that does not reflect how the sciences understand their own work. Because, as McCarty observes, “research in a discipline to which one is alien is difficult to see as good research, or even to see as research at all,” it is easy for computational humanities research to dazzle or to fizzle, but hard for it to usefully inform. Transitioning from theft to something closer to assimilation will require a calm recognition that many scientific papers present incorrect results, and that the rhetoric of rationality is no guarantee of usefulness or accuracy — a lesson which returns us to the debates of the eighteenth century.