In Search of Mixed Affect in Ancient Aesthetics: On “Being Moved”*

Over the last few years, scholars in psychology, philosophy, linguistics and literary studies have set out on racing expeditions towards what appears to be a largely uncharted region of human experience: the elusive feeling state that speakers of English usually refer to as ”being moved”. More or less equivalent terms can be found in languages all over the world today and in most cases their uses seem to overlap (Kuehnast et al. 2014); “bewegt sein” (German), “être ému” (French), “vara rörd” (Swedish), “commuoversì” (Italian), “estar conmovido” (Spanish), “byt’ rastrogannym” (Russian) and “kandoh” (Japanese) are but a few examples. In every-day life we are “moved” by a number of different things or events, which range from happy to sad, solitary to relational, and involve either real-life or fictional and artistic experiences. This multiplicity could be taken as proof that “being moved” is nothing more than a generic label we use to account for a state of emotional arousal which is itself generic (otherwise we would use more specific emotion terms) or, at best, confused and thus difficult to define in any other way. Co-occurrence and phenomenological blending with other emotions might also induce us to conflate “being moved” with the experience of, say, sadness, admiration, or joy. Hence, although the concept has an illustrious history within aesthetics, playing a prominent role in discussions about the enjoyment of negative emotions in the experience of art in the Eighteenth century (e.g. Schiller 1792), scholarship has, in the majority of cases, made sweeping use of it in order to denote emotional elicitation of any sort. Today, however, a growing number of researchers assert the need to treat “being moved” as a discrete affective state in its own right, determined by specific eliciting conditions, phenomenology, physiological outcomes, action tendencies and functions (see Tokaji 2003; Konečni 2005; Tan 2009; Cova & Deonna 2013; Menninghaus et al. 2015; Fiske et al. 2017).

At the seminar I will discuss problems of definition and points of agreement and disagreement in this recent literature before turning to an exploratory investigation of how emotion historiography might approach this affective state in antiquity. Although these recent studies as well as the longer tradition in modern aesthetics often cite the ancient rhetorical imperative that a good orator must not only teach and please but also “move” (Lat. movēre) the audience, this reference amounts to little more than an argumentum ad antiquitatem, in view of the fact that the ancient theorists used the term generically to refer to all kinds of emotion elicitation. In fact, although the emotional lexica of ancient Greece and Rome feature a large set of motion metaphors, it is far from easy to find distinctive lexicalizations of the emotion state we are interested in here. Yet, consider scenes like that in the sixth book of the Iliad, where the Trojan warrior Hector leaves the battlefield and plays with his baby son Astyanax before his wife, Andromache “took him back again to her fragrant bosom | smiling in her tears” (Iliad 6.484–85). Is this not the “objective correlative” of being moved – “a set of objects”, in T.S. Eliot’s (1921, 92) words, “a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion”? It would seem that studies of the lexical field of spatial emotion terms must be combined with a more dynamic “script” methodology; but is it possible to formulate objective criteria for narrative representations of this affective state, or objects eliciting this state, in ancient literary sources? How can affective narratology move beyond impressionistic introspection? And what can historical investigation of elusive mixed emotions of this sort contribute to ongoing debates on human emotions between biological fixity and social construction (see recently Adolphs 2017).
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