Unfelt

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References to the insensible but overwhelming power of love could seem especially at home in the breathless, heightened style of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fiction, perhaps more so than in scrupulous and alert courtship novels of the age of sentiment. Such gestures fit within what literary historians have called a florid, even “flatulent” fictional language of high-flown passion prevalent before Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. But the rhetoric of love in romance is usually understood as deploying a system of visible signs, displayed on the body and in conventional, often list-like literary representations of such displays. These can be revealing or deceptive and read well by characters or poorly. The insensible, never manifest in quite this way, cannot be used to set up any such challenges.

Instead it occupies an incongruous zone in romance, palpably an element of the genre’s descriptive style and, as we will see, of the philosophical disquisitions on love often taken up in it, yet not exactly part of its “externalizing” language of sighs and darting eyes. The idiom’s own way of testifying to the power of love lies in its refusal to find a location for it, either inside a heart or mind or outside in rhetorical, bodily, or social cues. The following discussion treats a few passages from three examples taken from this vast body of writing—a mid-seventeenth-century French romance, an epistolary roman à clef by Aphra Behn, and an amatory novel by Eliza Haywood—to identify the place of these gestures among the elements of romance style. If this place

1. Unfeeling before Sensibility
seems odd, it does so because it pulls against conventions of affective legibility often associated with romance. And as we will see, the idiom’s tendency to dislocate and render elusive the formidable powers of love is just what allows it to carry forward into the more restrained affective domain of later novels, while giving important transactions in them something of a romance flavor.

The vast idealistic French romances of the 1640s into the 1660s, so influential on English literature that they near seamlessly conjoin with it, quietly but consistently employ *insensiblement* and like terms to testify to the irresistible power of love. One instance of such influence is Georges de Scudéry’s *Almahide; or, The Captive Queen* (1661),¹³ translated and supplemented in 1677 by John Milton’s nephew John Phillips,¹⁴ and (before that) a source for John Dryden’s play *The Conquest of Granada* (1670). At one point in part 2 of *Almahide*, a group of characters discusses the advantage that male “submissive Lovers” have over violent, domineering ones. A character concludes, “that submission which seems so feeble, is more strong, than all the Machines which Love employs against a Heart; It insinuates insensibly, it renders it self Mistress, without perceiving it, and a long time after it is vanquish’d, it believes yet to be Victorious.”¹⁵ Here as elsewhere, the unfelt nature of an affect correlates with its intensity. In keeping with romance idealizations, in which love among the virtuous is powerful without being morally corrupting, the passage throws the very intention of the lover to vanquish in doubt, contrasting the effect of his submissiveness with “Machines” expressly designed for conquest. (Though one character will call submissive lovers “spies,” another will insist they succeed “neither by stealth, nor by force.”)¹⁶

The looseness of pronoun reference in the English passage enhances this effect of unknowing and unfelt power. “It” (submission) becomes “Mistress” (presumably of the beloved’s affections) unawares, but “it” is also what is “vanquish’d.” By being so vaguely characterized, as both ruler and ruled, the insinuation is essentially unsited, associated with neither party in the affair. The question of whether the adverb characterizes something done by, or something done to, remains unresolved. The vagueness here results in part from bad translation, though it is perhaps encouraged by a tendency of *insensiblement* to drift toward modifying various nearby words. In the original French passage,¹⁷ gendered pronouns assign the active and passive roles clearly. The “soumission” (designated with *elle*) insinuates itself so as to be mistress without the “cœur” (*il*) perceiving the process. But even here, the act’s occurrence insensibly (“*insensiblement*”) suggests that the lover who loves with “soumission” feels it no more than the heart he vanquishes. The passage’s irony moreover relies, of course, on the fact that “soumission” is passivity itself. The unfelt aligns with the unwilled character of the transaction. While *Almahide*
in other places uses “insensibly” to describe the success of deliberate seduction,\textsuperscript{18} here and elsewhere it helps characterize love’s power as more or less unfelt and unchosen by both parties.

Later in \textit{Almahide} this emphasis on love’s impersonality directs a more abstract, philosophical discussion, yet one that links the insensible more directly to affecting and affected matter. The dialogists are asked which “of the two they judge to be the most powerful, Love or Time.”\textsuperscript{19} Mahomad answers love, and notes love’s dominion “over all Nations, over all Ages, Sexes, Temperaments, and Conditions, over Brutes, as well as Men: Nay, even over the very Inanimates [\textit{chose insensibles}] themselves, which are not exempted from feeling his power” (lodestones, flowers bending to the sun, etc.). He concludes that love “Insinuates unperceivably [\textit{imperceptiblement}] into the Heart, insensibly [\textit{insensiblement}] gets possession of the Soul, reigns, tyrannizeth, inspires with Fear, with Hope,” and so on.\textsuperscript{20} Here “feeling,” an overwhelming emotional “power,” turns out again to depend on unfeeling. The turn to the “Heart,” the “Soul,” and the passions at the end does more to rank them along with “Brutes” and “Inanimates” than to distinguish them in some separate inner or immaterial space. If “Fear,” “Hope,” and the like evoke what we might call “psychology,” it is one as subject to a physicalized attraction as a lodestone.

This sense of equivalency among attractions extending throughout the world, from organic to inorganic matter, resonates with the seventeenth-century philosophical speculations that have served as inspiration for writing about affect today. The fanciful, passionate exchange in \textit{Almahide} of course is not equivalent to a theoretical declaration that inorganic matter can be seen as “sensitive.”\textsuperscript{21} But an urge to spread feeling around is part of the work’s intellectual milieu. “Distrust of Cartesian mechanism was prevalent in the de Scudéry circle,” notes Erica Harth, in part because René Descartes denied feelings to animals.\textsuperscript{22} Harth offers a reading of Madeleine de Scudéry’s \textit{Histoire de deux chaméléons} (1688) that debates with Claude Parrault concerning the anatomy of the creatures (two of which she owned herself), in which Scudéry “writes empathically of her animals’ feelings,” including the male’s lovelorn grief at the female’s death.\textsuperscript{23} This natural-scientific dispute, in which other members of the salon participated, resonates with the passage quoted above about the sensibility of “Brutes.”

And without denying the difference between spirit and matter—a denial unlikely to issue from the Scudéry group\textsuperscript{24}—the passage does bring “Inanimates” into the ambit of love. The word \textit{insensibly} permits this equivalency between feeling and unfeeling beings (even more than \textit{unperceivably}, which suggests something not perceived but which possibly could be). Pertaining on the one hand to living bodies (which feel or do not, depending on the circumstances),
and on the other to everything in the world commonly thought incapable of feeling, the word’s equivocation joins feeling and matter on a continuum. The connection is even more apparent in the language of the original, in which love’s insensible possession of the “Soul” is prefigured by the *chooses insensibles* also under love’s power. The unfeeling of inanimate matter seems akin to the soul’s unfeeling as it comes under love’s sway. By differentiating between the “Soul,” “Brutes,” and “Inanimates,” the text seems to accept real divisions between them even as the insensible force of “Love” affects them all. The over-riding of the line between inner and outer, spiritual and physical, minded and mindless is made possible by the unfeeling that drives love. The conversation thus suggests a modality of love’s power opaque in principle to feeling, materially deep and not at all “psychological.”

In *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684), Aphra Behn explores a more nakedly erotic world of seduction and scandal, less lofty than that of the romances of either Georges or Madeleine de Scudéry. The work’s epistolary form also makes the crucial turn to the first person, which allows the insensible to intrude in an especially dramatic manner on a mind intent on its own movements. Silvia, the protagonist, depicts herself as helplessly succumbing to seduction unawares. In her letter to Philander toward the beginning of volume 1, as she is sliding into her affair with him (intricately elaborated through this volume which, with subsequent ones, also reflects on the Monmouth Rebellion), she strains to account for the power of love in an expanded conception of its “Rhetorick”:

The Rhetorick of Love is half-breath’d, interrupted words, languishing Eyes, flattering Speeches, broken Sighs, pressing the hand, and falling Tears: Ah how do they not perswade; how do they not charm and conquer; ’twas thus with these soft easie Arts, that *Silvia* first was won! for sure no Arts of speaking cou’d have talk’d my heart away, though you can speak like any God! oh whether [*sic*] am I driven, what do I say; ’twas not my purpose nor my business here, to give a character of *Philander*, no not to speak of *Love*! but oh like Cowley’s Lute, my Soul will sound to nothing but to Love! talk what you will, begin what discourse you please, I end it all in Love! because my Soul is ever fixt on *Philander*; and insensibly its byas leads to that Subject.

Silvia insists initially that the brokenness of Philander’s “Rhetorick of Love” attests to his sincerity, in contrast to any more calculated “Arts of speaking” he might have employed. His displays of overwhelming feeling, “half-breath’d, interrupted words, languishing Eyes,” and the like cannot be feigned. (So runs a convention of wishful thinking in romance.) Michael McKeon remarks that
Silvia’s submission in this passage to a near-violent power evokes a “Petrarchan masochism.” Silvia here, however, needs to believe that both she and Philander equally have relinquished power, agency, and artful intent—that there is no “tyranny” of one lover over the other in their case. “Love” seems to have overtaken not only her but also him, and its broken rhetoric undoes his intent as well as hers.

But the passage’s first person allows Silvia to undergo an affect even more forceful than the one she attributes to her lover. Though bodily instead of verbal, his love remains “Rhetorick,” a set of signs to be read. For this reason, she can at least consider the question of whether his visible passion is artless or performed. (Behn here may be thinking of the Longinian question, which had recently been raised in Nicolas Boileau’s 1674 translation of On the Sublime, of whether there can be an art of passionately disordered expression; Longinus thinks there can.) Silvia’s own wayward passions are known differently, from her experience, and she finally comes (with unfortunate results) to judge Philander’s sincerity by his effect on her: “for sure no Arts of speaking cou’d have talk’d my heart away, though you can speak like any God!”

And this effect is insensible in some powerful way. The past tense and subjunctive suggest she can only wonder about how she lost her heart. Her answers indicate that she is searching for a narrative of her own emotions to fill in the gaps that love has left in it. And even if Philander’s mostly bodily rhetoric guarantees his sincerity, even if it really is unintentional and involuntary, as Silvia wants to believe, she can at least witness his behavior and locate it in time. (It will turn out, of course, that she will be betrayed by him.) Her love, on the other hand, has overtaken her unawares. It reveals its affective power not by an act of profound introspection but rather by the opposite: the suggestion that she cannot fully tell how or when her feelings have consumed her.

Silvia’s loss of control in the first person demonstrates an affective force most powerfully when she struggles to reflect on her own epistolary writing, only superficially similar to Philander’s rhetoric of love: “wh[i]ther am I driven, what do I say”? Like the dialogists in Almahide, she turns to the language of material causes and effects to find this place for love beyond rhetoric and beyond her own introspective powers. The image of her heart like “Cowley’s lute,” which can only sound on the theme of love, suggests a physical attunement like sympathetic vibration. When she concludes that “my Soul is ever fixt on Philander; and insensibly its byas leads to that Subject,” she describes the unfelt as an almost gravitational pull. That connotation of “byas” indicates a continuity if not an identification of lofty emotion and material force. And “insensibly” helps makes this connection between the unfelt physical and the felt emotional possible. Again it is not a question of any dogmatic assertion
of materialism or mechanism. Rather, Behn portrays the “Soul” of Silvia as sounding compulsively, pulling or being pulled insensibly, physically resonating. Behind all such overwhelming emotion, the capacity of the soul to be affected insensibly ensures that the intense feeling of love is finally felt.

This passage also anticipates a future of the insensible’s usefulness in sentimental fiction, as it allows a reconciliation of desire with virtue that writers such as Frances Burney will need for their own heroines’ advances toward marriage. The “byas” allows Silvia to invoke her conscious virtue while excusing her deviation from it: “No, I did not when I began to Write, think of speaking one word of my own weakness; but to have told you with what resolv’d Courage, Honour and Vertue, I expect your coming.”

The verb tenses again play out the drama of ever-elusive intention that the insensible demands. While Silvia’s experience of writing the letter unfolds in the present tense, she comes to realize that her “byas” has led her unawares to express something that, she now recalls, she had no intention of writing, much like Alexander Pope’s later dramatization of the uncontrolled compositional process of Eloisa. This play with a present-tense desire whose unintentional unfolding can only be retrospectively rejected insists on a conscious purity while desire is forcibly introduced to an (as yet, in Silvia’s case) honorable heroine and an honorable text. That is, “Courage, Honour, and Vertue” are not rendered merely ironic values or aspirations when they are only insensibly overcome.

This passage in Love-Letters could be read according to a tradition within feminist criticism that views women’s sexual passivity in amatory fiction as a kind of ruse to enable them to express their desires. They resist, but must do what they must. In a classic essay, Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that women authors of the period—she refers specifically to Haywood—sometimes portray feminine erotic agency as “unknowing,” and she argues that women must “enact a vision of irresponsibility, expressing female sexuality without being subject to judgment.” This helps clarify the gender-ideological role of the insensible in Behn and Haywood, as well as in the more morally watchful sentimental tradition. But it could be misleading if it suggests that unfelt desire in the period is a mere pretense or a “repression and denial” (in Spacks’s Freudian vocabulary) of feelings actually felt. The passage in Behn and ones in Haywood too (as we will soon see) invoke the insensible not to repress but to support the expression of vehement passion. Desire runs on two converging tracks. Far from a charade of weakness, the insensible in these fictions amplifies love’s affective power.

The usage of insensibly to indicate the unsuspected but overwhelming power of desire carries forward from seventeenth-century romance and seduction narratives into the so-called amatory fiction of the early eighteenth century.
Perhaps even more popular is the similar portrayal of love as obtaining its power over heroines “by degrees.” Such expressions have the effect of attenuating the complicity of the heroine’s will and desire by slowing them down. They seem as much functions of her external environment and the expectations of a social world around her as an inner impulse. Since desire does not erupt directly, fully formed, from the heart in a moment, it can seem less a matter of interior volition or feeling than a project of context and circumstance. Jonathan Kramnick has persuasively argued that in amatory fiction, especially the novels of Haywood, putatively interior states or acts such as desire or consent tend to be externalized. He takes up a scene in one of her most discussed novels, *Love in Excess* (1719), in which Amena, in love with the rake-hero D’Elmont, finds herself with him in the Tuileries, at night and the edge of ruin, saved when her maid interrupts. Kramnick, noting how Haywood’s language externalizes agency in the passage and wobbles its point of view so as to dissociate it from any particular mind available in the scene, remarks, “Bodies and parks do all the necessary work until the intrusion of social expectation in the person of the maid puts the measures to an end.”

The language of imperceptible degrees and the insensible in one way abets such an exteriorization of the mental states, motives, and acts of characters. As we have seen, however, such locutions tend to facilitate crossings from mental to physical, from outer to inner and back, rather than permit us to distinguish very clearly between what is mental and what is outside. They do not very stably or consistently point to “external” and visible contexts such as parks or social expectation. The oddly positive negativity of whatever is called insensible—its way of pertaining to the senses by not stimulating them—tends to make it particularly difficult to find. And by transposing the evolution of “inner” things like desire from the medium of space to that of time, both slow degrees and the insensible can be said to happen pretty much anywhere and everywhere.

Haywood’s *The Mercenary Lover: or, The Unfortunate Heiresses* (1726), now considered minor but which ran to three editions in its time, depicts the seduction of one of the two heiresses, Althea, in both such ways. First, Clitand-er’s opportunities for intimacy with her afforded by his marriage to her sister (recalling the scenario in Behn’s *Love-Letters*) “made him not fear but that a little Time and Assiduity, might by Degrees steal into her Soul those Inclinations which wou’d give him the absolute Possession of his Wishes.” This stealing into her soul is accomplished by both impersonal and Clitander’s own means, by “Time” itself and by (his) “Assiduity.” This combination, not merely his own strategic methods, comprises the ingredients of seduction. More important, he furnishes her with writing that he expects to work on her by itself:
The first Step he made towards the Accomplishment of this barbarous Enterprize, was to redouble the Civilities and Tendernesses with which he had been accustom’d to treat Althea, and knowing she was naturally a great Lover of Reading, took Care to bring her home every Day something new for her Amusement; I say Amusement, for I believe the Reader will easily imagine, the Books he desir’d she should peruse, were neither Religion, Philosophy, nor Morality; there are certain gay Treatises which insensibly melt down the Soul, and make it fit for amorous Impressions, such as the Works of Ovid, the late celebrated Rochester, and many other of more modern Date.⁴¹

Again, the blurring of the agency of and responsibility for desire ensues from terms such as insensibly. The books prepare Althea for seduction, but she is already susceptible to such susceptibility, which stems from her being already “naturally a great Lover of Reading.”

As a more or less blameless disposition darkens insensibly into a more culpable one, Althea retains her innocence, at least far as her own agency goes. She does not so much fall in love by acting involuntarily as become ready, without feeling it, to feel. The insensible hence prevents heroines from facing their principal challenge, in The Mercenary Lover and other amatory fiction by Haywood, which is, according to Michael Prince, “the challenge of reading social circumstances and other people as if they were texts,” and results in “the consequences of failing to do so accurately.”⁴² Like the “Rhetorick of Love” in Behn’s Love-Letters, the external, legible codes of amorous literature given to Althea depend for their effect on what cannot be sensed or “read.” Though Althea is initiated in amorous feeling and intent by reading itself, such initiation undoes her ability to master the text-like cues that lead her toward disaster. The rhetoric of passion and love, not only in this but in the earlier examples, functions in a nonrhetorical way by means of its unfelt force. Not recognized or able to be codified, this underside of the language of love does love’s most difficult work.