



Affective Mapping

MELANCHOLIA AND THE POLITICS
OF MODERNISM

JONATHAN
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Affective Mapping

Introduction

Melancholize

They get their knowledge by books, I mine by melancholizing.

—ROBERT BURTON, *ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY*

The writing of this book originated in my desire to explain something that seemed simultaneously self-evident and poorly understood. That is: not all melancholias are depressing. More precisely, if by melancholia we mean an emotional attachment to something or someone lost, such dwelling on loss need not produce depression, that combination of incommunicable sorrow and isolating grief that results in the loss of interest in other persons, one's own actions, and often life itself. In fact, some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world. This book is about these non- or antidepressive melancholias.

Even as understandings of melancholia have changed, the basic cluster of symptoms (sadness, grief, fear, affective withdrawal, loss of interest) it describes has remained relatively consistent.¹ Likewise, whether melancholia has been seen to stem from physiological imbalances (too much black bile or *melaina-kole*), astrological misfortune (born under the sign of Saturn), failures of faith (the sin of *acedia* or sloth), or unmourned losses, also persistent has been a sense that there may be a valuable aspect of this condition.² Within the discourse of melancholia we find a dialectic between emotional withdrawal and its apparent opposite, the most intense or exceptional devotion of affective energy. Thus, for example, the Aristotelian *Problemata* asks: “Why do all men of extraordinary ability in the field of philosophy or politics or literature or the arts prove to be melancholics?”³ Or, moving to the seventeenth century, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton affirms

the knowledge that might be produced by the creative contemplation uniquely facilitated by melancholy states: “They get their knowledge by books, I mine by melancholizing.”⁴ The word Burton uses here, *melancholize*, long since out of use, suggests that melancholy might not just be a mood state into which one falls, or which descends on one like bad weather. Instead, melancholizing is something one *does*: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past. It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge.

This book is concerned with a particular mode of modernist melancholizing. My analysis centers on three distinct texts: Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw* (1898), W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and Andrei Platonov’s *Chevengur* (1928).⁵ What melancholizing produces for James, Du Bois, and Platonov is the knowledge of the historical origins of their melancholias, and thus at the same time of the others with whom these melancholias might be shared. This knowledge, an “affective map,” this book argues, is what, for them and for their readers, makes possible the conversion of a depressive melancholia into a way to be interested in the world.

Several things distinguish late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century understandings of melancholia from earlier ones. Most significant is the connection made around that time between depressive melancholia and the problem of *loss*, a connection crystallized in Freud’s now famous argument first outlined in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”⁶ Briefly, Freud argued there that the mood state long associated with melancholia was caused by the failure to mourn a loss. Instead of mourning, which Freud saw as a kind of libidinal decathexis from the lost object, the melancholic internalizes the lost object into his or her very subjectivity as a way of refusing to let the loss go. (I examine the twists and turns, revisions and contradictions of Freud’s theory in Chapter 1.) In laying out this paradigm, I argue, Freud is not so much correcting or improving (as he supposed) our view of melancholia as giving us in his theory of melancholia an allegory for the experience of modernity, an experience (as I will discuss) that is constitutively linked to loss.⁷ In this, Freud is responding to the same problem as James, Du Bois, and Platonov: he seeks to find an aesthetic practice that could change one relation to loss into another, which in his case is the practice of psychoanalysis itself.

Where Freud was concerned to develop a universal theory of melancholy that would enable analysts to help patients arrive at individual

cures, Walter Benjamin saw melancholia as a definitely historical problem related to the experience of modernity. In this view melancholia is no longer a personal problem requiring cure or catharsis, but is evidence of the historicity of one's subjectivity, indeed the very substance of that historicity. In his connection of melancholia to the historical experience of modernity, Benjamin helps me to outline the conception of melancholia implicit to the practices of James, Du Bois, and Platonov. For these authors, insofar as the losses at the source of individual melancholias are seen to be generated by historical processes such as white supremacy (Du Bois), the mass cultural reification of the literary sphere combined with the reification of identity accompanying the invention of homosexuality (James), or the upheaval generated by war and revolution (Platonov), melancholia comes to define the locus of the "psychic life of power" (to borrow an evocative phrase from Judith Butler), the place where modernity touches down in our lives in the most intimate of ways.⁸ As such, melancholia forms the site in which the social origins of our emotional lives can be mapped out and from which we can see the other persons who share our losses and are subject to the same social forces. We might say that the melancholic concern with loss creates the mediating structure that enables a slogan—"The personal is political"—to become a historical-aesthetic methodology. This methodology's questions are: Whence these losses to which I have become attached? What social structures, discourses, institutions, processes have been at work in taking something valuable away from me? With whom do I share these losses or losses like them? What are the historical processes in which this moment of loss participates—in other words: how long has my misery been in preparation? These are the questions, *Affective Mapping* argues, that must find their way into the heart of an aesthetic practice if it is, in Walter Benjamin's words, to "arm one" instead of "causing sorrow."⁹

In writing about this distinctly modern antidepressive melancholia, I aim to contribute to the project Nietzsche called for when he lamented in *The Gay Science* that we lack a history of the passions: "All kinds of individual passions have to be thought through and pursued through different ages, peoples, great and small individuals . . . so far all that has given color to existence, still lacks a history."¹⁰ Nietzsche wonders how we can understand things such as friendship or marriage, punishment or asceticism without an examination of the function of affect in these formations. Although he did not, he might have spoken as well of the specific experiences of modernization—urbanization, industrialization,

colonialization and imperialism, modern warfare, the invention of “race,” the advent of the modern commodity and mass culture, the emergence of modern discourses of gender and sexuality, and the pathologization of homosexuality. How can we understand the nature and the impact of such historical processes without some sense of how they work on and through affect? It is not hard to see (whether we are thinking, for instance, of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, “The Waste Land,” *The Weary Blues*, *Nightwood*, or *The Trial*) that many modernist attempts to find a way to represent the experiences of modernity have done so by being especially attentive to the affective—as distinct from the cognitive or the corporeal for example—components of modern experience. Indeed, behind the extraordinary level of aesthetic experimentation that we sometimes call “modernism” we can see the desire to find a way to map out and get a grasp on the new affective terrain of modernity. In doing so, such modernisms have been concerned not only with the affective impact of modernization but also with the ways the social forces of modernity work *through* emotions, the ways we become the subjects that we are by the structuring of our affective attachments.



“Affective mapping” is the name I am giving to the aesthetic technology—in the older, more basic sense of a *techne*—that represents the historicity of one’s affective experience. In mapping out one’s affective life and its historicity, a political problem (such as racism or revolution) that may have been previously invisible, opaque, difficult, abstract, and above all depressing may be transformed into one that is interesting, that solicits and rewards one’s attention. This transformation can take place, I argue, not only because the affective map gives one a new sense of one’s relationship to broad historical forces but also inasmuch as it shows one how one’s situation is experienced collectively by a community, a heretofore unarticulated community of melancholics. Of course, this does not mean that collective consciousness *necessarily* follows—the functioning of the strands of collective affective attachment is a complicated topic in itself—but I do argue that the desire for that consciousness is always implicit in the writing of an affective map, and it lies nascent there for the motivated reader to take up.

I propose that we understand the task of turning one’s melancholia into a mode of vital connection with the world as changing one’s

“mood.” By “mood” I mean Heidegger’s *Stimmung*, which has also been translated as “attunement.”¹¹ One’s *Stimmung*, for Heidegger, is one’s primary way of being in the world, “the ‘presupposition’ for, and ‘medium’ of thinking and acting” (FCM, 68). That is, one’s *Stimmung* is one’s way of having certain things in that world matter to one; it is the atmosphere in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects. Ontologically, Heidegger insists, *Stimmung* “is a primordial kind of Being for Dasein, in which Dasein is disclosed to itself *prior* to all cognition and volition and *beyond* their range of disclosure” (BT, 175). For *Dasein* (literally “being there,” Heidegger’s word for “a being,” in the sense of a human being who necessarily finds itself in some “there”), everything about one’s being-in-the-world is filtered through and founded on one’s mood. And because we never find ourselves nowhere, because we always already find ourselves somewhere specific, we are never not in a mood; to be in the world is to be in a mood. We find ourselves in moods that have already been inhabited by others, that have already been shaped or put into circulation, and that are already there around us. As Charles Guignon puts it, “as we grow up in the social order into which we are thrown, we also become masters of a determinate range of possible moods that are ‘accepted’ in our world.”¹² I will say more about *Stimmung* shortly (in the Glossary), but the point to make here is that depression is the *Stimmung* in which the world and the people in it seem incapable of sustaining one’s interest or desire. And as anyone who has been depressed knows, one cannot simply *decide* to see the world differently. Changing one’s *Stimmung* is not simply a matter of will or decision. Rather, one must invoke or awaken a “counter-mood,” a task for which aesthetic activities of various kinds have long been a resource.

The kind of aesthetic practice I am concerned with here, however, is quite particular in its relation to melancholic moods. It is neither cathartic, compensatory, nor redemptive—probably the most commonly encountered ideas about the uses of aesthetics in relation to melancholia. In such views, art may be seen to transcend the exigencies of everyday life in the realm of beauty, or to relieve repressed emotions through a cathartic release. (In fact, as Herbert Marcuse argued in his essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” this compensatory mode may be seen historically as the dominant Western mode of aesthetic experience in general.) This is a tradition that perhaps peaked in the Romantic period and which still produced powerful results within what is sometimes called “high modernism.”¹³ To this day it is probably the

dominant discourse about the relationship between melancholia and aesthetics.¹⁴

The publication of Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in 1857 represents a turning point in the history of the relationship between melancholia and aesthetics. With Baudelaire, we see the emergence of a decidedly antitherapeutic melancholic poetry. Its aim is not to make you "feel better" or to redeem damaged experiences but to redirect your attention to those very experiences. One leaves Baudelaire's poetry not relieved of grief but aggrieved, clearer about what the losses at the origin of one's grief might be and what or whom may to be to blame for them. At the same time, however, as in "A Une Passante," for example, we are shown how one's losses might be a secret source of connection, interest, and perhaps even pleasure. Baudelaire's could be called a splenetic modernism, for it is his task to transform *ennui*, that "monstre delicat" that renders the world incapable of sustaining emotional involvement, into *spleen*: a state in which one is exceedingly aware of, angry about, and interested in the losses one has suffered. For Baudelaire, it would seem, feeling those losses, losses that in Baudelaire as much as in Freud have penetrated into the very structure of subjectivity, is the only way to be attuned to the unavoidably melancholic nature of modern life.¹⁵

Walter Benjamin wrote that the "decisive ferment" that allows the transformation from *ennui* into *spleen* is "self-estrangement," and I make a similar claim about the antidepressive effects of the affective map.¹⁶ I take Benjamin to mean self-estrangement first of all in the sense of being able to treat oneself as an object, so that one is able to subject one's emotional life to analysis, reflection, and direction. One must be self-consciously alienated from one's emotional life for it to become historical datum. But I also read estrangement in the sense of the Russian formalist *ostraneniye* or Brechtian "alienation effect": making strange or defamiliarizing. My own emotional life must appear unfamiliar, not-mine, at least for a moment, if I am to see its relation to a historical context. The idea is to allow one's emotions to lose their invisibility and necessity and become instead contingent, surprising, relative. Thus, for example, by way of the experience of loss, Baudelaire identifies alternately with widow and ragpicker, lesbian and drunk. Through poetic identification with this surprising and apparently diverse set of characters, Baudelaire defamiliarizes the experience of loss, lack, and alienation they all share, allegorizing for him and for us elements of the melancholic nature of his own life and of modern experience more generally.

What I am calling an affective map is essentially a mobile machine of self-estrangement. James, Du Bois, and Platonov not only give a narrative or representation of a particular structure of feeling, they seek to produce a particular kind of affective experience in their readers, and at the same time to narrate this very experience. In other words, the affective map narrates the production of its own reader. Thus, for example, in *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James solicits a kind of epistemological interest from his readers by leaving the reality of the ghosts and the sanity of the governess textually indeterminable. The reader must guess or “read into” (in James’s words) the text to come to any kind of “knowledge” about the ghosts or the governess. At the same time, the story narrates just such an epistemological interest on the part of the governess herself, who is reading into the behavior of the children to try to get at the truth of their intercourse with the ghosts. This will to knowledge on the part of the governess rhymes with the reader’s own, and reproduces the eponymous phenomenon described by Foucault in relation to the knowledge of sexual identity. In a direct allegorical gesture, this pursuit ends in the death of Miles. In this way, James provides a nugget of affective experience for the reader, one with direct historical resonance and relevance, and then also tells the reader something about that experience within the narrative itself. In essence, the reader has an affective experience within the space of the text, one that repeats or recalls earlier, other experiences, and then is estranged from that experience, and by way of that estrangement told or taught something about it. This is the moment of affective mapping.

I mean “mapping” here, I should emphasize, in a slightly unexpected manner. That is, the affective map is not a stable representation of a more or less unchanging landscape; it is a map less in the sense that it establishes a territory than that it is about providing a feeling of orientation and facilitating mobility. I mean the term to suggest something essentially revisable; when it works, it is a technology for the representation to oneself of one’s own historically conditioned and changing affective life. In this sense, it is a map in the sense proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, when they distinguish the rhizomatic map from the tracing: the rhizome is open, connectable in multiple directions, related to the real in an experimental fashion. (I discuss all of this in more detail in Chapter 2.) The revisable, rhizomatic affective map not only gives us a view of a terrain shared with others in the present but also traces the paths, resting places, dead ends, and detours we might share with those who came before us.

For better or worse, this book follows a fairly standard organizing principle: in the first part I explain and contextualize the book's key concepts and its methodology, and in the second part I make use of these concepts in readings of a range of texts. Of course, the book was not written in this order; I only figured out what concepts were important and what method I was using by way of these readings, and I hope that some of the tension and conversation between the more abstract thinking about concepts and methodology and the readings of particular texts remains legible.

Before anything else, I explain some key terms—mood, structure of feeling, affect, emotion—in a kind of glossary. Then, in a long first chapter, I briefly sketch out the relationship between melancholia and modernity, and the place of modernism therein, and lay out the concepts and arguments from Freud and Benjamin that will be useful for the rest of the book. I examine Freud's theory of melancholia in relation to the long history of theories of melancholia, proposing that we see psychoanalysis as itself a modernist aesthetic practice. My sense of the distinction between a depressive, depoliticized melancholia and a non-depressing, politicizing melancholia probably owes more to Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" than to any other text. In this first chapter I read this text, with others by Benjamin, to elaborate my approach to this distinction and also to lay out the reading of Benjamin's take on melancholia, which will remain axiomatic for the rest of the book.

In Chapter 2, I elaborate this notion of the affective map, drawing on the use of this term and of cognitive mapping in environmental psychology and urban planning—the context from which Fredric Jameson adopted the concept of cognitive mapping, bringing it into the sphere of literary theory. Then, borrowing from Adorno's ideas about the "aesthetic shudder," I explain a bit more carefully than earlier what I mean by affective mapping.

From here I move to the primary literary texts. These texts are by no means the only ones I might have written about; Djuna Barnes and Nella Larsen, for example, are other figures I considered. But, besides the fact that James, Du Bois, and Platonov are all authors in my fields of specialization, I have also chosen them strategically as authors who may in one way or another be representative, foundational, or paradigmatic. Henry James is, of course, central to the Anglo-American tradition. And because one of the earliest texts of psychoanalytic literary

criticism, “The Ambiguity of Henry James,” by Edmund Wilson, focused on this story, and Shoshana Felman’s rereading of Wilson’s reading has been an important essay in the establishment of a new, more sophisticated, Lacanian deconstructive criticism, *The Turn of the Screw* in particular is a classic text of psychoanalytic criticism. It is thus an ideal site to engage with and historicize psychoanalytic thought. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* is foundational for African American letters as aesthetic theory, literary performance, and political, sociological, and psychological analysis, as is well known and much remarked. And Platonov, although very poorly known outside of the Russian reading public (in part because of the difficulty of translating his work, due to its experimental character), is widely acknowledged within that public to be one of (if not *the*) most important Russian writers of the twentieth century.¹⁷ *Chevengur* is his only full-length novel (although he did write several short novels or “tales”). Of the three, Chapter 3 is the shortest, as I wanted to provide a quickly graspable example of the mode of reading I am proposing. A final note on the chapters: knowing how most people read books (or at least how I do), I have tried to write the chapters so that they can usefully be read without reading the chapters that precede them. This means that, occasionally, I repeat myself regarding some point or other from Benjamin, Freud, or Heidegger so that the reader need not go back to an earlier section in order to make sense of whatever local argument I am making about the text at hand.

This is a comparative book. Even though Henry James read *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Du Bois studied with Henry’s brother William and would later become interested in Freud and the Soviet Union and Marxism, and Platonov had recently read Freud when he wrote *Chevengur*, this is not a book about influence, about the social or institutional formations of modernism, or about sites of transnational contact or communication.¹⁸ I am not making any claim about actual contact or influence between or among these authors.

That is to say, I am interested only in their shared approach to aesthetic activity as a response to the losses generated by the experience of modernity. I hope through the juxtaposition of these different figures to suggest that they are all responding to distinct but nonetheless parallel experiences of modernization. While it is outside of this book’s scope to *prove* such a case, I want to propose that the problem with loss, with the loss that cannot be mourned, is common to the experience of

modernity in general. The point is not that modernity is experienced everywhere in the same way but that the experiences *are* similar, and that melancholia is one site where we can perceive more finely the particularities as well as the similarities among the different experiences of modernity.

Glossary

Affect, Emotion, Mood (*Stimmung*), Structure of Feeling

The vocabulary of affect can be confusing, in part because there are many terms—*affect*, *emotion*, *feeling*, *passion*, *mood*—and a long history of debate not only about which terms are the right ones and how to distinguish between them, but about what they mean in the first place. And while there is a great deal of excellent recent work on affect in several disciplines (including literary studies, history, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, cognitive science, and neurobiology),¹ this does not mean that a general consensus, or even a common conversation, has emerged. While providing a map of the terrain opened up by this new work is a task beyond the scope of this book, I hope it will be helpful at least to gloss the terms this book uses and give a sense of the theoretical traditions to which I am most indebted.² There are four such terms: *affect*, *emotion*, *mood* (or *Stimmung*), and *structure of feeling*. What I aim to provide here is nothing so ambitious as a “theory of affect” but, rather, the understanding of these terms that I will take as axiomatic for the rest of the book. Because this part of the book endeavors to summarize a body of material for the reader who is not familiar with it, readers more acquainted with recent work on affect may wish to skip sections they find covering material they already know.

Affect and Emotion

In the long history of work on affect and emotion, sometimes the two terms are taken to be synonymous, other times a sharp difference is as-

serted, and in both cases the meaning of the terms is and has been highly variable. In everyday usage, while the words are often interchangeable, there are significant connotative differences. Where *emotion* suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, *affect* indicates something relational and transformative.³ One *has* emotions; one is affected *by* people or things. Although a strong conceptual distinction between affect and emotion is not central to this book's argument, I exercise a preference for *affect* as the more useful term and precise concept in part because it is the relational more than the expressive I am interested in. For the most part, however, it seems least confusing to follow everyday usage of the two terms (that is, more or less synonymous but with the aforementioned connotative differences) and to be explicit about it when I think a difference between them needs to be emphasized.

In the effort to establish a working definition of affect/emotion, Aristotle offers a useful starting place. He defines the emotions as "those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure. Such are anger, pity, fear, and the like, with their opposites."⁴ In this understanding, emotions describe a moment when one's experience of the world is altered in a way that affects one's judgment of that world. Together, the emotions constitute one of our basic ways of establishing value, of assessing or judging our world, often prior to cognition or will. In many ways, Silvan Tomkins, whose theory of the affects I more or less follow, is elaborating this Aristotelian understanding when he writes: "It is our theory of value that for human subjects value is any object of human affect. Whatever one is excited by, enjoys, fears, hates, is ashamed of, is contemptuous of, or is distressed by is an object of value, positive or negative" (SIS, 68).⁵

Tomkins argued for treating the affects as a kind of irreducible "motivation system" or "assembly," one that inevitably interacts with but is nonetheless distinct from the drives, from strictly physiological factors, from perception, and from elements of "cognition" such as belief, thought, and choice. Like visual perception or the reasoning mind, the affects have an internal logic—a systematicity—all their own.

In attributing centrality and specificity to the affects, Tomkins seeks to displace the psychoanalytic emphasis on the drives or instincts as the primary sources of human motivation. Freud, who never really developed a coherent account of the affects, often treated them as the quantitative energy stemming from the drives, a kind of undifferentiated intensity that is given form and content by the ideas or objects to which they were attached. (See Chapter 1 for more on Freud and affect.) On

the whole, however, Freud was not really interested in affect as a thing in itself, attributing basic human motivation and evaluation instead to the libido (or, depending on the period of his career one is considering, other instincts such as the death drive). And although he does offer very interesting considerations of the “emotional tie” (also discussed later), even here his account suffers from lack of explanation of the specific affects that may comprise this tie.

For Tomkins, one of the key differences separating the affects from the drives was their degree of freedom in object and duration; for example, one can be terrified of anything, for any amount of time, but can only breathe air, and cannot do without it for very long. Affects are not necessarily attached to any one object, indeed can attach to any object, and are free to modify each other and to change one’s experience of the drives as well. Tomkins notes, for example, that “the panic of one who experiences the suffocation of interruption of his vital air supply has nothing to do with the anoxic drive signal per se,” but is the result of the amplifying effects of fear.⁶ Similarly, the sexual drive could just as easily be diminished by shame, anxiety, or boredom as increased by excitement.

It is, of course, not just Freud to whom Tomkins is responding. In some ways his emphasis on the specific “feeling” of affects, as well as their rootedness in physiological phenomena—facial behavior above all—recalls the famous theory proposed by William James, who held that emotions were essentially the “feeling” of a bodily change or state. James writes: “My thesis . . . is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion.”⁷ Thus, for example (and counterintuitively), weeping did not follow on sadness, but the reverse: sadness *was* the feeling of weeping, happiness was the feeling of smiling, and so forth. In this view, one cannot have an emotion without the corresponding bodily change—the surge of adrenaline, hair on end, rush of blood to the face—and one’s qualitative experience of that change is the emotion itself. While Tomkins does pick up on the connection between affects and facial/bodily movements in exploring the particularity of each affect, unlike James, Tomkins would always insist on the autonomy of affect, the extent to which the affects could not be understood exclusively in terms of this bodily response.

During Tomkins’s career, the Jamesian theory was challenged most forcefully by what had come to be called a “cognitive” view of emotion. In the 1960s, the work of Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer signaled a shift toward this perspective.⁸ Schachter and Singer conducted a series

of studies in which they injected subjects with adrenaline in different contexts, finding that the emotion the subjects “experienced” depended on the interpretation or label they imposed on the physiological change. They hypothesized that an emotion is a relatively undifferentiated physiological arousal combined with a cognitive interpretation of it. To simplify and generalize, this view, which has been extensively developed not only in cognitive psychology but also in Anglo-American philosophy, is interested in the ways emotions get their “content” from the ideas, beliefs, thoughts, expectations, or other “cognitive” aspects of consciousness that modify corporeal affects. Part of the motivation behind this argument appears to be a desire to defend emotions as rational, not simply “dumb” or undifferentiated physiological phenomena.⁹ Tomkins, although he was no less insistent (than defenders of a cognitive theory of emotion) on the internal complexity of affect, always maintained that the affects had their own specificity. Thus, he was an early and energetic critic of the cognitive position, writing that “surely no one who has experienced joy at one time and rage at another time would suppose that radically different feelings were the same except for different ‘interpretations’ placed on similar ‘arousals.’”¹⁰ Affects, in Tomkins’s view, are not productively examined in terms of a body-mind dichotomy; they occur neither in mind nor body but in an assemblage, network, or system that is not comprehensible in terms of its corporeal or cognitive component parts.¹¹

Recent research on the brain, as described by Joseph Le Doux and Antonio Damasio, supports Tomkins’s case for the specificity of affect from another angle. Le Doux, for example, argues for “emotion and cognition . . . as separate but interacting mental functions mediated by separate but interacting brain systems.”¹² That affect systems can operate independently from at least some elements of cognition such as object perception and recognition and reasoning is evinced by examinations of a range of brain-damaged patients who lose capacity in an area of the brain that limits their capacity for emotional processing without any effect on their cognitive faculties. Their research also suggests that many affective responses take place automatically, before reasoning, deliberation, or other cognitive functions can begin.¹³

Some recent research also seems to confirm Tomkins’s view that there are basic, more or less universal affects that are linked to corresponding facial expressions and other autonomic bodily responses.¹⁴ The case for innate emotions had been made earlier by Darwin, and has been bolstered more recently by the crosscultural research on facial recognition

by Paul Ekman and Carrol Izard.¹⁵ Although Ekman set out to prove that affects were in fact culturally constructed, he found that basic facial expressions, and understandings of the situations likely to produce such expressions, were surprisingly consistent across cultural contexts.¹⁶ What was variable, he found, were “display rules”: the norms and habits through which people manage their emotional expressions. In other words, while everyone may know what a smile is, or recognize the look of disgust, people can still learn to suppress or modify these facial responses.

Even more culturally variable than display rules are the ways affects combine with their objects. If certain affects are basic, what are not at all basic are the ways our affects are educated as to which objects are right for which affects in which situations (i.e., one should be ashamed of this, but angry about that, disgusted by this other thing, but only if other people are present, and so on). Thus, to claim that there are some basic affects does not mean that people’s experience of these affects is not variable, just that there are elements of invariable, autonomic affective response that we all share. Consequently, an insistence on the irreducibility or universality of certain affects does not necessarily contradict an anthropological or sociological emphasis on the constructedness and diversity of emotions and emotional expression.¹⁷

In arguing that affects operate according to their own specific logic Tomkins borrowed from cybernetics and systems theory. Put simply, systems theory replaces the model of a whole made out of parts with a model in which systems interact with environments. The basic principle of the system is the distinction between an inside (the system) and an outside (the environment) and the establishment of a “feedback mechanism” or “feedback loop” that takes in (input) the results of an act (output) in order to modify the initial act.¹⁸ The thermostat, for example, is the mechanism by which a heating/cooling system regulates itself, by testing the results of its acts (the turning on or off of the furnace) and takes it back in as information to determine what to do next (the turning on or off of the furnace). The thermostat, like any feedback mechanism, is monologic; it does its work by seeing everything else—the “environment”—only on the terms relevant to the system; nothing about the world matters to the thermostat except the temperature.

Thus, like all systems, affects reduce “infinite to finite information loads” through a kind of functional simplification.¹⁹ As many theorists of affect have noted, affects serve the valuable function of focusing our attention on something very specific—such as a danger, a loss, or the

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