

ugly feelings

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introduction

This book presents a series of studies in the aesthetics of negative emotions, examining their politically ambiguous work in a range of cultural artifacts produced in what T. W. Adorno calls the fully “administered world” of late modernity.¹ This is the world already depicted by Herman Melville with startling clarity in “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853)—a fiction in which the interpretive problems posed by an American office worker’s *affektive* equivocality seem pointedly directed at the *political* equivocality of his unnervingly passive form of dissent. What, if anything, is this inexpressive character feeling? Is Bartleby’s unyielding passivity, even in the polemical act of withholding his labor (“I prefer not to”), radical or reactionary? Should we read his inertness as part of a volitional strategy that anticipates styles of nonviolent political activism to come, or merely as a sign of what we now call depression? In Melvillean fashion, the following chapters dwell on affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity in literature, film, and theoretical writing, to explore similarly ambivalent situations of suspended agency. They

thus draw together two seemingly disparate philosophical definitions—Hannah Arendt’s claim that “what makes man a political being is his faculty of action” and Baruch Spinoza’s description of emotions as “waverings of the mind” that can either increase or diminish one’s power to act—and attend to the aesthetics of the ugly feelings that index these suspensions.²

Recalling the corner of the office in which Melville’s scrivener is wedged and cordoned off by a screen, we might think of this book’s project as Bartlebyan in a more reflexive sense, in that it privileges the circumscribed standpoint of the literary to examine problems whose greatest import arguably lies beyond the sphere of the aesthetic *per se*. For Bartleby’s powerful powerlessness can also be thought of as exemplified by literature or art itself, as a relatively autonomous, more or less cordoned-off domain in an increasingly specialized and differentiated society. As Adorno’s analysis of the historical origins of this aesthetic autonomy suggests, the separateness from “empirical society” which art gains as a consequence of the bourgeois revolution ironically coincides with its growing awareness of its inability to significantly change that society—a powerlessness that then becomes the privileged object of the newly autonomous art’s “guilty” self-reflection (*AT*, 225). Yet one could argue that bourgeois art’s reflexive preoccupation with its *own* “powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world” is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis (104). In this manner, the discussion of aesthetic autonomy in *Aesthetic Theory* suggests that literature may in fact be the ideal space to investigate ugly feelings that obviously ramify beyond the domain of the aesthetic proper, since the situation of restricted agency from which all of them ensue is one that describes art’s own position in a highly differentiated and totally commodified society.

Each of the feelings explored in the following chapters—envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation, a racialized affect I call “animatedness,” and a strange amalgamation of shock and boredom I call

“stuplimity”—can thus be thought of as a mediation between the aesthetic and the political in a nontrivial way. As a whole, the book approaches emotions as unusually knotted or condensed “interpretations of predicaments”—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner.³ My exclusive focus, however, is on the negative affects that read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such—a dilemma I take as charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective. These situations of passivity, as uniquely disclosed and interpreted by ignoble feelings like envy (of the disempowered for the powerful) or paranoia (about one’s perceived status as a small subject in a “total system”), can also be thought of as allegories for an autonomous or bourgeois art’s increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its *own* relationship to political action. At the core of *Ugly Feelings*, then, is a very old predicament—the question of relevance—that has often haunted the discipline of literary and cultural criticism. The evidence here would suggest that the very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in a increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—is a prime occasion for ugly feelings.

Yet I want immediately to emphasize the deeply equivocal status of the ugly feelings featured in this study. For although dysphoric affects often seem to be the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs, envy, paranoia, and all the emotional idioms I examine are marked by an ambivalence that will enable them to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class *ressentiment*, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic “solutions” to the problems they highlight and condense. Admittedly it is part of this book’s agenda to recuperate several of these negative affects for their *critical* productivity, but no one warns us bet-

ter about the danger of romanticizing them than Paolo Virno, for whom the classic “sentiments of disenchantment” that once marked positions of radical alienation from the system of wage labor—*anxiety, distraction, and cynicism*—are now perversely integrated, from the factory to the office, into contemporary capitalist production itself: “Fears of particular dangers, if only virtual ones, haunt the workday like a mood that cannot be escaped. This fear, however, is transformed into *an operational requirement*, a special tool of the trade. Insecurity about one’s place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being ‘left behind’ translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself.”⁴ Here we see how capitalism’s classic affects of disaffection (and thus of potential social conflict and political antagonism) are neatly reabsorbed by the wage system and reconfigured into professional ideals. Nothing could be further from Fredric Jameson’s more widely known thesis about the “waning” of negative affect in our contemporary moment.⁵ Instead, Virno shows how central and perversely *functional* such affective attitudes and dispositions have become, as the very lubricants of the economic system which they originally came into being to oppose.⁶ Yet while irreversibly integrated into the contemporary, post-Fordist organization of labor, these ugly feelings remain, for Virno, “open to radically conflicting developments” (“AD,” 26). For example, while there is nothing redeeming about the “eager” disposition of opportunism, its “‘truth’ . . . what might be called its neutral kernel, resides in the fact that our relation with the world tends to articulate itself primarily through possibilities, opportunities, and chances, instead of according to linear and univocal directions.” As Virno points out, “This modality of experience, even if it nourishes opportunism, does not necessarily result in it” (25). For other kinds of behavior, and even kinds diametrically opposed to opportunism, “might also be inscribed within an experience fundamentally structured by these same possibilities and fleeting opportunities. We can discern such radical and transformative behavior, however, only by

tracing in the opportunism so widespread today the specific modality of experience to which this behavior might indeed be correlated, even if in a completely different way” (25). Indeed, one could extrapolate from Virno’s claims to argue that in the transnational stage of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment, our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others under the signs of relatively unambiguous emotions like anger or fear. In other words, the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings—ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient, Bartlebyan, but still diagnostic nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth. This is why, for Virno, even an unattractive feeling like opportunism can provide the “kernel” from which to shape “transformative behavior.” For all its pettiness, the feeling calls attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth.

While this book makes a similar if more modest claim for the social significance of its own fundamentally ambivalent “sentiments of disenchantment” (an ambivalence demonstrated by the fact that all are mobilized as easily by the political right as by the left, as the histories of disgust and paranoia illustrate so well), it is useful to recall that with notable exceptions like Hobbes or Niccolò Machiavelli, who made fear central to their theories of modern sovereignty and the state, it is the discourse of philosophical aesthetics, rather than that of political philosophy or economy, in which emotions have traditionally played the most pivotal role—from Longinus to Immanuel Kant on the sublime (perhaps the first “ugly” or explicitly nonbeautiful feeling appearing in theories of aesthetic judgment), to the twentieth-century mutation of this affect I describe in my chapter on stuplimity. Or, to trace another exemplary arc, from the seventeenth-century “Affect Theorists” who tried to systematize the correlation of musical forms and genres to specific emo-

tions, to Susanne Langer's analysis of music as a "tonal analogue of emotive life" in *Philosophy in a New Key*, to my own attempt to reanimate the concept of literary "tone" by means of the atonal but no less musical concept of noise. The investigation of how new theories of affect might expand the discourse of aesthetics thus continues a long-standing intellectual project, even as it sets this book apart from cultural histories of specific emotions (as, for instance, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History*, by Tom Lutz; *Anatomy of Disgust*, by William Ian Miller; and *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion*, by Julie Ellison), as well as from new philosophies of emotion that inquire into what feeling is (*Parables for the Virtual*, by Brian Massumi; *Feeling in Theory*, by Rei Terada; and *The Vehement Passions*, by Philip Fisher). In a sense, the book's turn to ugly feelings to reanimate aesthetics is simply the flip side of its privileging of the aesthetic domain as the ideal site to examine the politically ambiguous work of negative emotions.

More specifically, this book turns to ugly feelings to expand and transform the category of "aesthetic emotions," or feelings unique to our encounters with artworks—a concept whose oldest and best-known example is Aristotle's discussion of catharsis in *Poetics*. Yet this particular aesthetic emotion, the arousal and eventual purgation of pity and fear made possible by the genre of tragic drama, actually serves as a useful foil for the studies that follow. For in keeping with the spirit of a book in which minor and generally unprestigious feelings are deliberately favored over grander passions like anger and fear (cornerstones of the philosophical discourse of emotions, from Aristotle to the present), as well as over potentially ennobling or morally beatific states like sympathy, melancholia, and shame (the emotions given the most attention in literary criticism's recent turn to ethics), the feelings I examine here are explicitly *amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. In fact, most of these feelings tend to interfere with the outpouring

of other emotions. Moods like irritation and anxiety, for instance, are defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the “suddenness” on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends.⁷ And unlike rage, which cannot be sustained indefinitely, less dramatic feelings like envy and paranoia have a remarkable capacity for duration. If *Ugly Feelings* is a bestiary of affects, in other words, it is one filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally being, well, weaker and nastier.

This weakness and nastiness notwithstanding, most of the negative affects in this study have managed to endure in a way that other feelings once widely in circulation (like the nineteenth-century feelings of “neurasthenia” and “amativeness”) have not, acquiring a colloquial status that broadens the range of sociohistorical dilemmas they can be used to interpret. Each ugly feeling will thus be examined in a cultural context where it seems particularly charged or at stake, ranging from contemporary feminist debates over the perceived problem of aggression between feminists (a context in which the antagonistic as well as pejoratively feminized feeling of “envy” becomes especially problematic) to an American cultural discourse that from the antebellum period forward has found it compelling to imagine the racialized subject as an excessively emotional and expressive subject (a situation in which the affect I call “animatedness” becomes especially problematic). Envy and animatedness could thus be described as affective ideologemes, in the sense of being “historically determinate conceptual or semic complex[es] which can project [themselves] in the form of a ‘value system,’” but also, more simply, as concepts that become the site and stake of various kinds of symbolic struggle.⁸ While this book pays close attention to the conditions under which these struggles unfold, and singles out specific contexts in which they become particularly intense, it is not a history of feelings. Its overarching project is rather a theoretical one, calling for a more fluid reading across forms, genres, and periods than is the prevailing norm in academic criticism today. Hence, texts are frequently read in what

may seem like jarring juxtapositions: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Martin Heidegger's analysis of anxiety in *Being and Time* read with Melville's *Pierre*, for instance, in my analysis of anxiety's curious elevation to a place of prominence in Western intellectual life. In the tradition of Barbara Johnson's book *The Feminist Difference*, this method of disjunctive alignment is intended to allow the texts to become "readable in new ways" and thus generate fresh examinations of historically tenacious problems.⁹

In this manner, the strength of this book resides not in the historical detail it will supply, but in the theoretical groundwork it will construct. In fact, by not just analyzing but mobilizing affective concepts to investigate a wide range of dilemmas, the book makes arguments that provide motivation for further historical research by explaining why these feelings might be interesting enough to merit attention in the first place. It also demonstrates how feeling can be used to expand the project of criticism and theory. Just as one chapter mobilizes envy to disclose the unusual difficulty feminine aggression has posed for an otherwise versatile and capacious psychoanalytic theory on which feminist film criticism has strongly relied, another invokes the affect I call "stuplimity" to highlight certain limitations in classic theories of the sublime that prevent it from adequately accounting for the experience of boredom increasingly intertwined with contemporary experiences of aesthetic awe. Marshaling its minor affects to investigate impasses in contemporary theory and criticism that might otherwise remain unseen, the book attempts to demonstrate how emotion might be recuperated for critical praxis in general, shedding new light on the intimate relationship between negative affect and "negative thinking," Herbert Marcuse's shorthand for ideology critique in the dialectical tradition.¹⁰ In general, like a vaudeville show or revue film (where Max Horkheimer and Adorno find "the negative" to "glimmer for a few moments" in their otherwise unhesitating indictment of the culture industry), this book spotlights a large and transatlantic ensemble of texts by authors across genres and periods.¹¹

Despite an array that may seem idiosyncratic, the selection of texts by these authors—Sigmund Freud, Ralph Ellison, Silvan Tomkins, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Gertrude Stein, Nella Larsen, John Yau, and Melanie Klein, among others—has been determined by the *kinds* of negative feeling I have chosen to emphasize. In this I follow the lead of Hobbes. In his discussion in *Leviathan*, for instance, of the role played by fear in securing the covenants upon which social order in the commonwealth depends, Hobbes argues that the human fear of “invisible spirits” (which, prior to the time of civil society, superseded our fear of the power of other humans) gave rise to a specific form or genre: the oath. Hobbes defines this as “a form of speech, added to a promise, by which he that promiseth, signifieth, that unless he perform, he renounceth the mercy of his God.” “And this,” he adds, “that the fear of breaking faith might be the greater.”¹² Specific kinds of emotion thus could be said to determine specific “literary kinds”—and, in Hobbes’s example, one that will strategically intensify the very emotion at its origin (Fisher, *VP*, 8). In a similar vein, the noncathartic feelings in this book could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended “action”) and does so as a kind of politics. Such a politics is of a Bartlebyan sort—very different, say, from the direct activism supposedly incited, according to what has now become American folklore, by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s poetics of sympathy and the genre of sentimental literature as a whole.¹³ Just as one can study fear through the specific forms to which it gives rise, such as the oath, the alibi, or complex genres like the horror film, my book examines the synthesis of boredom and shock I call “stuplimity” through a literature of exhausting repetitions and permutations, paranoia through a transcription-based poetry that continually raises the question of whether writing comes from inside or outside its author, and the racialized affect of animatedness through the screen genre of animated cartoons.

The equivocality of the Bartlebyan aesthetic suggests that there

is a special relationship between ugly feelings and irony, a rhetorical attitude with a decidedly affective dimension, if not a “feeling” per se. For the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form of “I feel ashamed about feeling envious” or “I feel anxious about my enviousness”) that significantly parallels the doubleness on which irony, as an evaluative stance hinging on a relationship between the said and the unsaid, fundamentally depends.¹⁴ In their tendency to promote what Susan Feagin calls “meta-responses” (since it is hard to feel envy without feeling that one should *not* be feeling envy, reinforcing the negativity of the original emotion), there is a sense in which ugly feelings can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not.¹⁵ This is why the aesthetic examples in this book tend *not* to be drawn from the more recognizably “emotional” genres—such as melodrama, sentimental fiction, tales of supernatural horror, or lyric poetry—to which literary critics interested in such matters have traditionally turned. While the ironic as well as the non-cathartic aspect of ugly feelings drives this book’s preference for “constructivist” rather than “expressivist” forms as ideal sites for examining the social and symbolic productivity of emotion in general, it is another key aspect of these negative feelings—that of being noticeably weaker in intensity than what Philip Fisher calls the “vehement passions” underwriting canonically major forms and genres like Homeric epic and Shakespearean tragedy—which informs its preference for texts that even seem oddly impassive: texts that, like “Bartleby,” foreground the absence of a strong emotion where we are led to expect one, or turn entirely on the interpretive problems posed by an emotional illegibility. The fact that this book reads the tonally ambiguous *Confidence-Man* rather than the rage-driven epic *Moby-Dick*, Nella Larsen’s superficially “irritated” *Quicksand* but not the melodrama of jealousy that is *Passing*,

and Beckett's exhausting poetry of permutations and combinations as opposed to the Romantic lyric, proceeds directly from its emphasis on the ignoble cousins of the philosophically canonical emotions featured in Fisher's study. With the turn to the ambiguous affects of the administered world's many "Sub-Subs"—Melville's appellation for the minor employee, or "mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm," who dutifully assembles the cetological "Extracts" that open *Moby-Dick*¹⁶—rather than those of more iconic figures such as Ahab, Othello, or Lear, my focus will be on irritation *instead of anger, envy rather than jealousy*, and "stuplidity" *as opposed to the transcendent feeling of the sublime*. It is interesting to note here that while the texts chosen for the way they highlight these feelings are drawn from both high and mass culture, all are canonically minor. Something about the cultural canon itself seems to prefer higher passions and emotions—as if minor or ugly feelings were not only incapable of producing "major" works, but somehow disabled the works they do drive from acquiring canonical distinction.

Still, while partly a response to one philosopher's call for a study of feeling with a more idiosyncratic focus than those that "concentrate on analyzing the features of a handful of classic emotions,"¹⁷ the "negativity" of the feelings in this book obtains at several levels that the classic emotions share. Like rage and fear, ugly feelings such as envy can be described as dysphoric or experientially negative, in the sense that they evoke pain or displeasure. They can also be described as "semantically" negative, in the sense that they are saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values (such as the "pettiness" one traditionally associates with envy); and as "syntactically" negative, in the sense that they are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings "away from" rather than philic strivings "toward." In the case of these explicitly agonistic emotions, informed by what one psychoanalyst calls the global affect of "against," the negativity at stake is algorithmic or operational, rather than value- or meaning-based, in-

volving processes of aversion, exclusion, and of course negation.¹⁸ It is these multiple levels of negativity that make the ugly feelings in this study so useful for *conjoining* predicaments from multiple registers—showing how sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas, in particular, produce formal or representational ones. The affect I call animatedness, for instance, will allow us to take the disturbingly enduring representation of the African-American as at once an excessively “lively” subject and a pliant body unusually susceptible to external control and link this representation to the rhetorical figure of apostrophe (in which a speaker animates or “gives life” to nonhuman objects by addressing them as subjects capable of response), and, further, to connect these to a symptomatic controversy surrounding the televisual aesthetics of dimensional animation, a technique in which clay or foam puppets are similarly brought to “life” as racialized characters by being physically manipulated and ventriloquized.

In this manner, even as the exaggerated expressiveness and hyperactivity associated with animatedness marks an important exception to the Bartlebyan aesthetic fostered by the other feelings in this book, it similarly draws our attention to the politically charged predicament of suspended agency from which all of these ugly feelings ensue. As the translation, into affect, of a state of being “puppeteered” that points to a specific history of systemic political and economic disenfranchisement, racialized animatedness actually calls attention to this predicament in a particularly emphatic way. It is the situation of passivity itself, and the allegorical significance it transmits to the ugly feelings that both originate from and reflect back upon it, to which I now want to turn in closer detail, by examining several moments of narrative inaction from two other American stories of the corporate workplace: the crime melodrama *Double Indemnity* (Paramount, 1944; directed by Billy Wilder, based on the novel by James M. Cain) and the conspiracy film *The Conversation* (Paramount, 1974; directed by Francis Ford Coppola). Like Melville’s “Story of Wall Street,” both films depict a worker’s in-

creasingly alienated relationship to the corporation that employs him, as well as to the institutions of the state. Both are also examples of film noir, a postwar genre commonly understood (even to the point of cliché) as being aesthetically and ideologically driven by an entire spectrum of dysphoric feelings: paranoia, alienation, greed, jealousy, and so forth.

The inertial moments from the two films I want to examine could not be more different from the films' more highly memorable moments of intense emotion, which (unsurprisingly) correlate with significant actions propelling the plot forward: such as, in the case of *Double Indemnity*, the kiss that seals the protagonist's decision to help his lover kill her husband, the murder itself, his final confrontation with the femme fatale, and so forth. In contrast to the "mere recital" of events, which Aristotle finds superior to visual spectacle for the maximization of catharsis ("mere recital" entailing a summary in which the duration of events narrated greatly exceeds that of their actual narration, such that "even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity"), the moments from the noir films that concern us involve a narrative expansion or stretch, in which "discourse time" becomes considerably longer than "story time."¹⁹ While it has been noted that cinema in general "has trouble with summary," often resorting to devices ranging from montage sequences to "cruder solutions . . . like peeling calendars," the preference for the narrative stretch over a compression that "forces us to take in the entire story almost instantaneously" might also be said to reflect the difference between the paranoia that suffuses the postwar film noir and the fear that drives classical tragedy; as a feeling without a clearly defined object, paranoia would logically promote a more ambient aesthetic, one founded on a temporality very different from the "suddenness" central to Aristotle's aesthetics of fear.²⁰ The anticathartic device of dilating the time in which any particular incident takes place thus accentuates the manner in which these uneventful moments mirror the general situation of

obstructed agency that gives rise to all the ugly feelings I examine, allowing them to function as political allegories in Arendt's sense above. But despite their obvious difference from scenes of high drama keyed to emotional tonalities which we are intended to recognize instantly, and even as their own affective quality remains comparatively undefined, these moments of conspicuous inactivity remain affectively charged. What seems indeterminate here, however, is actually highly determined. In fact, I would suggest that what each moment produces is the inherently ambiguous affect of affective disorientation in general—what we might think of as a state of feeling vaguely “unsettled” or “confused,” or, more precisely, a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling. This is “confusion” in the affective sense of bewilderment, rather than the epistemological sense of indeterminacy. Despite its marginality to the philosophical canon of emotions, isn't this feeling of confusion *about* what one is feeling an affective state in its own right? And in fact a rather familiar feeling that often heralds the basic affect of “interest” underwriting all acts of intellectual inquiry? Turning to our two films, we may find it useful to refer to this very *specific* state of affective indeterminacy as the negative feeling of “disconcertedness”—the feeling of not being “focused” or “gathered.” Such an ugly feeling is intimately tied (as we shall see) to the “loss of control” explicitly thematized in each moment of stalled or suspended action. Most important, in both films the dysphoric affect of affective disorientation—of being lost on one's own “cognitive map” of available affects—is concretely rendered through a *spatial* confusion made possible by a notoriously unstable narrative technique that film scholars have credited the genre of film noir with most fully instrumentalizing: subjective or first-person camera.

My first example involves a tracking shot from *Double Indemnity* that eventually captures the wounded protagonist, Pacific All-Risk Insurance agent Walter Neff (Fred McMurray), as he speaks into a dictaphone and concludes his narration of the events that have led

up to his present condition (Figures 1a–c). Throughout the film, Neff’s self-recorded narration, which eventually discloses his participation in two murders, is directly addressed to his avuncular boss and mentor at the insurance company, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), who has also been a major character in the story which Neff has been recounting and which the film presents to us through a series of voiceover-flashbacks. The shot that returns us to the scene of narration for the last time seems, initially, unambiguously objective—as would be thematically appropriate, given the symbolic import of the “impartial” recording instrument into which Neff speaks his story, and the fact that the depiction of a narrator in the actual act of telling or narrating (in this case, a technologically mediated, quasi-documentary act) will always have a stronger claim to objectivity than his subjectively filtered tale. As the camera comes to rest on the actor’s profile, however, in a view so uncomfortably close that we can see the beads of sweat on his averted face, Neff slowly turns his head from the dictaphone toward the camera, as if to signal a realism-breaking awareness of its presence, or, more simply, a growing consciousness of being watched (Figures 1d–g). Our sense of the emotional tension that comes to inflect the shot is subsequently confirmed as Neff says, “Hello Keyes.”

The cut to the compositionally contrasting shot that follows (Figure 1h), a long view revealing Keyes standing in the opened office door, unsettlingly reveals that the point of view of the preceding shot has in fact *been* that of Keyes, and that Keyes—in keeping with his general role as Neff’s intellectual superior as well as the film’s one representative of law and order—has been watching and listening to Neff’s confession, unbeknownst to both Neff and the film’s audience, for an indefinite time, if not all along. “How long have you been standing there?” asks Neff. “Long enough,” is Keyes’s response. The implications of the objective shot’s curiously stealthy and *belated* subjectivization are as serious as its affective intensity is strong. Just as Keyes “sneaks up” on Neff at the level of

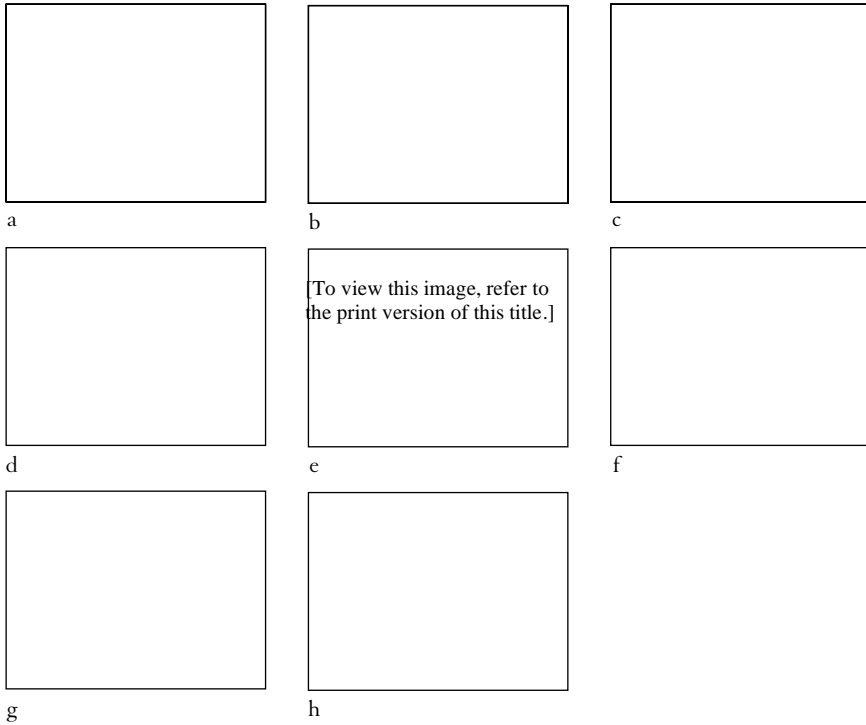


FIGURE I

discourse as well as at the level of story, and visually as well as narratively, as his point of view steals into and claims authorship over a gaze initially owned by no subject in the diegesis, Neff is in a double sense “caught,” since it is understood that his capture in the visual field surreptitiously overtaken by Keyes will entail his capture by the law. In fact, in the original, bleaker version of the film which did not survive its studio censors, the arresting shot leads not only to Neff’s imprisonment, but to his execution by the state in a gas chamber. In this manner, the moment when Keyes steps out of the subjectively filtered world of the story told by Neff and enters the more objective world in which Neff’s act of telling takes place is not only a moment designed to reaffirm his character’s power

and authority (only Keyes, among all the other characters contained in the flashback sequences, is able to cross over from the past into the present), but one that produces an affective disorientation and qualitative change in the relationship between the two men.

Variations of this alternation between subjective and objective framing, and its use for the purpose of producing the highly specific feeling of feeling uncertain *about* what one is feeling—the “disconcertedness” which, in this case, heralds and morphs into the more articulated pathos of feeling “busted”—abound in film noir and its generic descendants. In Francis Ford Coppola’s Watergate-era conspiracy film *The Conversation* (1974), we find the emotional effects of the technique maximized when it is used to produce the paranoia of a surveillance professional apprehended in the very gaze one would expect him to command. Like Cain’s Pacific All-Risk Insurance agent and Melville’s Wall Street scrivener, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a white-collar worker who becomes increasingly alienated from and, eventually, overtly antagonistic toward the organization that employs him. Though we have already seen this opposition take the form of a work slowdown culminating in a full-blown stoppage (in “Bartleby”), as well as what Neff describes as an attempt to “crook the house,” in *The Conversation* it appears as an effort to thwart a corporate conspiracy, revealed by a protagonist with much greater autonomy and libidinal investment in his work than his fictional predecessors had. Yet here the link between the moment of suspended action in the film’s story and the frustrated agency of the film’s male protagonist is much more structurally and thematically explicit as well as politically charged. For while Harry’s stunted “faculty of action” appears in the guise of an individual problem, the film immediately reveals it as a synecdoche for a much larger social and in fact national ill, as exemplified by the collective apathy the eponymous conversationalists in the crucial opening scene discuss, as they observe sleeping homeless men (who may or may not be Vietnam war veterans) in a crowded public park—a setting that itself suggests a miniaturized

representation of the social whole. Moreover, what we have elsewhere examined as a passivity with political resonance or implications is presented here as a passivity with respect to the domain of politics proper. For we learn that in an earlier phase of his surveillance career, while employed by a state prosecutor, Harry has refused, in the name of the “objectivity” conveniently idealized by his profession, to concern himself with the content of the surveillance cases assigned to him, regardless of the violent ends (including the murder of a local union official) which he suspects his government work may have furthered. Indexed here by the specific feelings of paranoia and guilt, rather than an affective absence or illegibility, Harry’s political passivity, and correlative obsessions with maintaining his privacy and solitude, will become most evident in his inability to prevent a murder engineered by the private corporation for which (in a trajectory that neatly reverses *Bartleby’s* move from the postal service’s Dead Letter Office to a lawyer’s firm on Wall Street) he has left the Attorney General’s office to work—an inability he cannot overcome despite the technical expertise that has given him advance knowledge of the plot and thus his chance to redeem his past detachment. The allegorically charged moment of narrative stasis that concerns us occurs in the hotel room in which this murder (a sign as well as a direct consequence of Harry’s political impotence) has taken place.

Dramatized, again, by a high ratio of discourse time to story time (and tellingly silent in the context of a film about conversations), the scene opens as Harry reenters this room after the traumatic experience of overhearing, from an adjacent room, the actual sounds of the crime. The take that concerns us begins with a view of Harry cautiously peering through the half-open door (Figure 2a). Moving in the direction of his gaze, the camera drops him from its visual field as it very slowly and methodically, much like a highly skilled surveillance professional, pans across the enigmatically unoccupied and immaculate room (Figures 2b–h). Because

Harry has abruptly disappeared from the visual field, as the pan continues we are made to understand that we are seeing what he sees. Without any break in its continuity or flow, the shot has thus already undergone a transition from objective to subjective. The relatively long duration of the pan seems intended, in fact, to secure the shot's surreptitious change in valence, to give the viewer time, as it were, to get used to its subjectivization. But as the camera completes its near 180-degree turn around the room, we are surprised by Harry's sudden *reappearance* at the far right edge of the visual field (Figure 21). Here the shot undergoes its second transition, from subjective back to objective—for how else could Harry appear in a shot designed to represent his *own* gaze? In this case, the uncertainty over the authorship of the visual field highlights the pathos of the surveillance professional's increasing impotence and self-entanglement in the corporate conspiracy (a ghostly after-image, if we follow Fredric Jameson's lead, of the social totality of late capitalism itself) in which he hopes to intervene.²¹ In this otherwise uneventful and unemotional scene (one in which the enunciated content, or what we are shown, is that there is precisely "nothing to see"), Harry loses control of his own gaze—through a desubjectifying discourse that anticipates his own eventual transformation into an *object* of surveillance by the very corporation that has hired him, as the film's final scene depicting his failed effort to debug his own apartment ominously makes clear. In fact, the shot's cunning *re-objectivization* suggests just how uncertain this surveillance expert's grasp of the visual field has perhaps been all along.

Though *Double Indemnity* has already shown us how this alternation between subjective and objective enunciation can be used to produce irony as well as the uncanny affect of disconcertedness, the technique is used in *The Conversation* to produce another highly determinate feeling—paranoia—that not coincidentally replicates the subjective/objective oscillation in its basic structure: Is the enemy *out there* or *in me*? Confusion about feeling's objective or subjective status becomes *inherent* to the feeling. Our readings of the

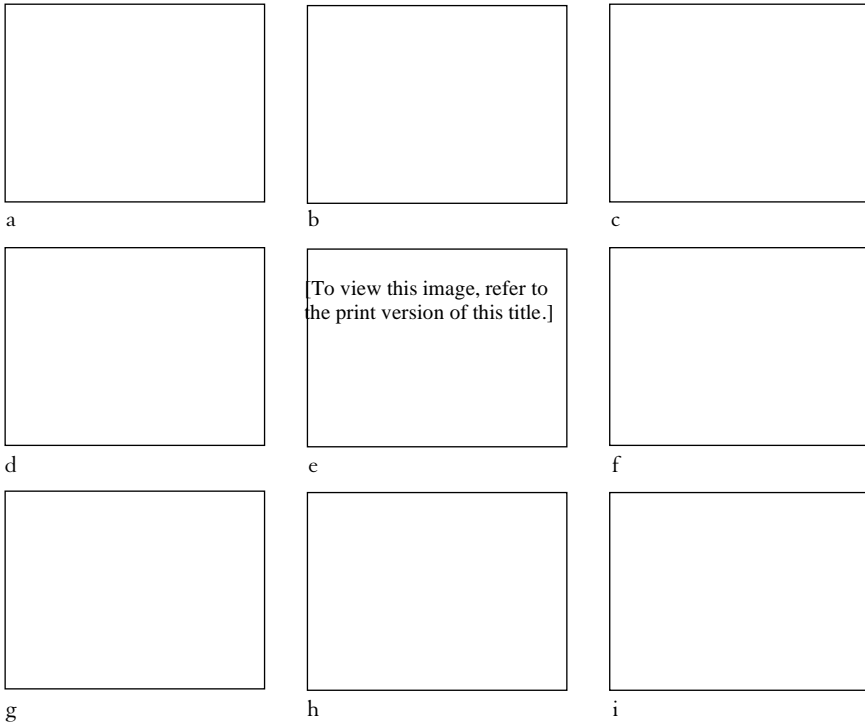


FIGURE 2

Bartlebyan moments of inaction highlighted above have thus prepared us for a crucial reversal of the familiar idea that vehement emotions—in particular, the strongly intentional or object-directed emotions in the philosophical canon, such as jealousy, anger, and fear—destabilize our sense of the boundary between the psyche and the world, or between subjective and objective reality. In contrast, my argument is that a systematic problematization of the distinction between subjective and objective enunciation lies at the heart of the Bartlebyan feelings in this book—minor affects that are far less intentional or object-directed, and thus more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities, than the passions in the philosophical canon. For just as the question of whether one's para-

noia is subjective or objective is internal to paranoia, the historically feminized and proletarianized emotion of envy has another version of this problematic at its core. While envy describes a subject's polemical response to a perceived inequality in the external world, it has been reduced to signifying a static subjective trait: the "lack" or "deficiency" of the person who envies. Hence, after a person's envy enters a public domain of signification, it will always seem unjustified and critically effete—regardless of whether the relation of inequality it points to (say, unequal ownership of a means of production) has a real and objective existence. In this manner, although envy begins with a clearly defined object—and it is the *only* negative emotion defined specifically by the fact that it addresses forms of inequality—it denies the very objectivity of this object. In doing so, it oddly bears a much closer resemblance to feelings lacking clearly defined objects, such as anxiety, than it does to an intentional emotion like jealousy. Envy is, in a sense, an intentional feeling that paradoxically undermines its own intentionality.

Marked by this conversion of a polemical engagement with the *objective* world into a reflection of a *subjective* characteristic, the confusion over a feeling's subjective or objective status that we have seen become internal to paranoia also seems internal to envy. Both are feelings that contain, as it were, models of the problem that defines them. Even an ostensibly degree-zero affect like animatedness has a version of this subjective/objective problematic at its core—namely, the question of whether "animation" designates high-spiritedness, or a puppet-like state analogous to the assembly-line mechanization of the human body famously dramatized by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. In the form of a dialectic of inside/outside, the subjective/objective problematic will likewise haunt Heidegger's and Hitchcock's strikingly similar conceptions of "anxiety," and will motivate the spatial fantasy of "thrownness" that sustains the affect's intellectual aura and prestige. In the form of a tension between psychological interiors and bodily exteriors, the subjective/objective problematic will become similarly integral to

the affect of irritation—defined, as Nella Larsen will show us, by its very liminality as an affective concept (weak or mild anger), given its unusual proximity to a bodily or epidermal one (soreness, rawness, inflammation, or chafing).

The striking persistence with which the feelings in this book reflexively “theorize” or internalize the confusion between the subjective status and objective status of feeling in general can be taken as following from their relatively weak intentionality—their indistinctness if not absence of object. Indeed, while it is widely agreed that “emotions play roles in forms of action,”²² the feelings in this study tend to be diagnostic rather than strategic, and to be diagnostically concerned with states of *inaction* in particular. Even the objects of envy and disgust, the most strongly intentional and dynamic feelings among my set of seven, and the only two that can be classified as emotions proper, are imbued with negativity. While envy, as we have seen, aggressively casts doubt on the objectivity of the very object that distinguishes it from other agonistic emotions (the social relation of inequality), disgust is constituted by the vehement rejection or *exclusion* of its object. Hence while disgust is always disgust *toward*, in the same way that envy is envy *of*—whereas it makes no sense to speak of stupidity of or animateness toward—its grammar brings it closer to the intransitive feelings in this study than to the other emotions with which it is traditionally classified. For while envy and disgust are clearly object-directed, their trajectories are directed toward the *negation* of these objects, either by denying them or by subjecting them to epistemological skepticism.

Not surprisingly, the boundary confusions built into the structure of these feelings, whether in the form of inside/outside, self/world, or psyche/body, reappear in the aesthetic forms and genres they determine. They will therefore return in the series of representational predicaments I will mobilize these ugly feelings to read: ranging from controversies about the use of the “ugly” cinematic technique of claymation (dimensional screen animation) as a for-

mat for representing racial minorities on television, to the kind of bad or contagious mimesis—resulting in a symptomatic confusion between female self and female other, and even between phantasmatic identifications and observable acts of imitation—which crops up in accounts of female envy such as those found in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud) and the lurid film *Single White Female*. While important to these specific aesthetic or representational controversies, the question of feeling’s objective or subjective status has in fact been central to numerous philosophical investigations into the exact role and status of emotion in the aesthetic encounter. These investigations include debates over whether Aristotle uses *katharsis* to refer to something that takes place in the audience or that takes place in the tragic drama (that is, whether it refers to a response undergone by the viewing subject or to an event presented in the object viewed); John Dewey’s effort to divorce expression from “the mere issuing forth or discharge of raw material” by describing “esthetic emotion” as “objectified” emotion; T. S. Eliot’s closely related attempt to separate “personal emotion” from “art emotion,” which he describes as a mixture or cocktail producing “feelings which are not in actual emotions at all”; the counterintuitive effort, on the part of Edmund Burke and other Enlightenment empiricists, to use emotional qualities to “objectify” or standardize judgments of taste (so as to avoid the problem of relativism it inevitably poses); and Gérard Genette’s unapologetically subjectivist theory of aesthetic judgment as a mode of illusory projection, in which a quality or value reflecting the negative or positive feeling inspired by an object’s appearance, in what amounts to a fundamentally subjective appraisal, is treated “as if” it were one of the object’s own intrinsic properties.²³ For Genette, who claims to “out-Kant” Kant by fully acknowledging the relativism Kant’s subjectivist theory of aesthetic judgment attempted to sidestep (by asserting the claim for universality in the judgment itself), aesthetic judgment *is* this illusory objectification. It is this process that produces what Genette calls “aesthetic predicates,” affective-aesthetic

values like “precious,” “stilted,” “monotonous,” or “imperious,” created from, or based upon, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure that accompanies our initial perception of the aesthetic object (*AR*, 90). Genette in fact describes these objectifying predicates, which bear a close resemblance to what I. A. Richards called “aesthetic or ‘projectile’ adjectives,” as descriptive terms that “sneak in” evaluations of the object based on *feelings* about the object.²⁴ There is thus a sense in which the “aesthetic relation,” which for Genette is more or less synonymous with “objectification,” can be understood as an oblique effort to justify the presence of feeling in every aesthetic encounter.

The subjective-objective problematic, magnified by the relativism of aesthetic judgment and other classic problems in the discourse of aesthetics (including the contested notion of special “aesthetic feelings”), is central, as we have seen, to the ugly feelings in this book, as well as to the artistic forms and genres they generate. It will be a particular concern in my discussion of “tone” (Chapter 1), the affective-aesthetic concept that will implicitly inform all the analyses of the aesthetics of specific feelings that follow. Yet the subjective/objective problematic so central to the philosophy of aesthetics can also be traced back to the philosophy of *emotion* in general. It has become the über-question of recent theoretical writing on feeling in particular, as evinced in the analysis of emotion after “the death of the subject” (Rei Terada) or attempts to differentiate “emotion” and “affect” on the grounds that the former requires a subject while the latter does not (Lawrence Grossberg, Brian Massumi).²⁵ These questions reflect the extent to which the subjective dimension of feeling, in particular, in seeming to undercut its validity as an object of *materialist* inquiry, has posed a difficulty for contemporary theorists. The present spotlight on emotion in literary criticism can be understood partly as an attempt to redress its earlier exclusion on such “subjectivist” grounds, including its failure to be grasped by the more positivistic kinds of cultural-historical analysis and the more dryly technical kinds of semiotic analysis

that dominated literary studies in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as by poststructuralist theories of literary language prevailing in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the former case, feeling's marginalization stemmed from its perceived incompatibility with "concrete" social experiences; in the latter (as Terada most fully examines), from its perceived incompatibility with poststructuralism's skeptical interrogation of the category of experience itself. Though emotion once posed an embarrassment to these very different critics for very different reasons, most critics today accept that far from being merely private or idiosyncratic phenomena, or reflecting a "romantically raw domain of primitive experiential richness" that materialist analysis will be unable to grasp (Massumi, *PV*, 29), feelings are as fundamentally "social" as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional objects of historicist criticism (as Raymond Williams was perhaps the earliest to argue, in his analyses of "structures of feeling"), and as "material" as the linguistic signs and significations that have been the more traditional objects of literary formalism. Although feeling is not reducible to these institutions, collective practices, or discursive significations, it is nonetheless as socially real and "infrastructural" in its effects "as a factory" (Massumi, *PV*, 45).

The affect/emotion split originated in psychoanalysis for the practical purpose of distinguishing third-person from first-person representations of feeling, with "affect" designating feeling described from an observer's (analyst's) perspective, and "emotion" designating feeling that "belongs" to the speaker or analysand's "I." Yet Massumi and Grossberg have made claims for a stronger distinction, arguing not just that emotion requires a subject while affect does not, but that the former designates feeling given "function and meaning" while the latter remains "unformed and unstructured" (Massumi, *PV*, 260, note 3).²⁶ As Grossberg puts it, "Unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations."²⁷ Similarly, Massumi argues that while emotion is "a subjective content, the

sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal,” affect is feeling or “intensity” disconnected from “meaningful sequencing, from narration” (*PV*, 28). The difficulty affective “intensity” poses for analysis is thus strikingly analogous to the analytical difficulty which Williams coined his term “structures of feeling” to address—that is, the kind posed by social experiences which “do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action.”²⁸ In escaping qualification much like Williams’ structures of feeling, which as “social experiences in solution” lie “at the very edge of semantic availability” (*ML*, 132), affective intensity clearly creates difficulties for more positivistic kinds of materialist analysis, even as it always remains highly *analyzable* in or as effect (Massumi, *PV*, 260, note 3).

While strong arguments have thus been made—primarily on the basis of a subjective/objective divide, but also in terms of oppositions like narrative/nonnarrative or semiotic/asignifying—for the idea that emotion and affect “follow different logics and pertain to different orders,” some aspects of this taxonomic division will be more useful and important to this book than others (Massumi, *PV*, 27). Certainly less narratively structured, in the sense of being less object- or goal-directed, the intentionally weak and therefore often politically ambiguous feelings in this book are in fact much more like affects, in accordance with the definitions above, than emotions—which, for Martha Nussbaum, are “closely connected with action; few facts about them are more obvious.”²⁹ Tied intimately, in contrast, with situations of what Dewey calls “being withheld from doing,”³⁰ the feelings in this book are obviously not as strategic as the emotions classically associated with political action; with their indeterminate or undifferentiated objects, in particular, they are less than ideally suited for setting and realizing clearly defined goals. Whereas Hobbes and Aristotle have shown how the principle of mutual fear actively binds men into the contracts that sup-

port the political commonwealth, and how anger advances the redressing of perceived injustices through retaliation, it is difficult to imagine how either of these actions might be advanced by an affective state like, say, irritation. While one can be irritated without realizing it, or knowing exactly what one is irritated about, there can be nothing ambiguous about one's rage or terror, or about what one is terrified of or enraged about. Yet the unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular.

While the distinction between affect and emotion is thus helpful here in a number of ways, I will not be theoretically leaning on it to the extent that others have—as may be apparent from the way in which I use the two terms more or less interchangeably. In the chapters that follow, the difference between affect and emotion is taken as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind. My assumption is that affects are *less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* “sociolinguistically fixed,” but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* “organized in response to our interpretations of situations,” but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers. As suggested above, ambient affects may in fact be better suited to interpreting ongoing states of affairs. What the switch from formal to modal difference enables is an analysis of the *transitions* from one pole to the other: the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects. At the end of the day, the difference between emotion and affect is still intended to solve the same basic and fundamentally descriptive problem it was coined in psychoanalytic practice to solve: that of distinguishing first-person from third-person feeling, and, by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity from feeling that is not. Rather than also trying to dissolve this subjective/objective problematic by creating two distinct categories of feeling, this study

aims to preserve it for its aesthetic productivity. We see this not just in the meaningful ironies or specific feelings generated by film noir's oscillations between first-person and third-person point of view, but also in the concept of cinematic or literary tone. For as anticipated by film noir's demonstration that certain kinds of ugly feeling (paranoia, disconcertedness) become maximized when we are most uncertain if the "field" of their emergence is subjective or objective, the tone of an artwork—which obviously cannot be reduced to representations of feeling within the artwork, or to the emotional responses the artwork solicits from its viewers—is a concept dependent upon and even constructed around the very problematic that the emotion/affect distinction was intended to dissolve.

By "tone" I mean a literary or cultural artifact's feeling tone: its global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world. Hence, while the concept I refer to includes the connotations of "attitude" brought to the term by I. A. Richards and other New Critics, I am not referring to the same "tone" they narrow down to "a known way of speaking" or a dramatic style of address. Instead, I mean the formal aspect of a literary work that makes it possible for critics to describe a text as, say, "euphoric" or "melancholic," and, what is much more important, the category that makes these affective values meaningful with regard to how one understands the text as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations. It is worth noting here that literary criticism's increased attention to matters of emotion has predominantly centered on the emotional effects of texts on their readers, and, in the predominantly historicist field of nineteenth-century American studies, where the surge in the discussion of emotion has seemed particularly intense, on the expressivist aesthetics of sympathy and sentimentality in particular. But what gets left out in this prevailing emphasis on a reader's sympathetic identification with the feelings of characters in a text is the simple but powerful question of "objectified emotion," or unfelt but perceived feeling, that presents itself most forcefully in the aesthetic concept

of tone. The absence of attention to this way of talking about feelings and literature not only is specific to recent literary scholarship on emotion (though it becomes particularly glaring in such a context), but points to a long-standing problem in philosophical aesthetics that we have already had a glimpse of above, in which an overemphasis on feelings in terms of purely subjective or personal experience turns artworks into “containers for the psychology of the spectator” (Adorno, *AT*, 275). Tone’s original association with the New Critics, who not only de-emotionalized the concept but showed how easily it could be conscripted into a gentlemanly discourse of nuance and implication designed to produce and sharpen social distinctions (as the irony of T. S. Eliot demonstrates so well), may be partly responsible for the dearth of attention paid to tone in their wake, even in later literary structuralisms that provided reinvigorated analyses of other formal categories like plot, setting, and character. But while there has been a conspicuous absence of attention to tone itself, critics have continued to rely heavily on the notion of a text’s global affect for the construction of substantive arguments about literature and ideology or society as a whole. The “euphoria” Jameson ascribes to a cluster of late twentieth-century artworks, for instance, is designed to do nothing less than advance his critique of postmodernism as the logic of late capitalism, in the same way that Walter Benjamin’s isolation of “a curious variety of despair” in the Weimar poetry of Erich Kästner enabled him to diagnose a much broader “left-wing melancholy” that, as Wendy Brown notes, extends just as problematically into our contemporary political discourses.³¹ Tone does a great deal of diagnostic and critical work for these writers and many others. Yet compared to other formal categories relied on for the analysis of literature in society, “tone” in my explicitly feeling-related sense, as a cultural object’s affective bearing, orientation, or “set toward” the world, remains notoriously difficult to define.³² In fact, because tone is never entirely reducible to a reader’s emotional response to a text or reducible to the text’s internal representations of feeling (though it

can amplify and be amplified by both), the problem it poses for analysis is strikingly similar to the problem posed by uncertainties concerning a feeling's subjective or objective status. For we can speak of a literary text whose global or organizing affect is disgust, without this necessarily implying that the work represents or signifies disgust, or that it will disgust the reader (though in certain cases it may also do so). Exactly "where," then, is the disgust? Similarly, the "joyous intensity" Jameson ascribes to the work of Duane Hanson in his aforementioned essay on postmodernism does not imply that Hanson's hyperrealistic sculptures of tired, elderly museum guards and sagging, overweight tourists *represent* or *express* joy, or that they make the viewer *feel* joyous—as opposed to, say, mildly amused or unsettled.³³ Who is the subject, then, of the euphoria to which Jameson refers? Should this feeling belong to a subject? How is it even produced by the object from which it ostensibly emanates?

I ask these questions not to dispute the tone Jameson attributes to these postmodern artifacts—the exhilaration he is speaking of is clearly of the capitalist "special effect": flawless verisimilitude as a spectacular display of technological skill and power—but to underscore how central the subjective/objective problematic is to the concept of tone itself, such that to resolve or eliminate the problem would be to nullify the concept or render it useless for theoretical work.³⁴ Tone *is* the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce, much in the same way we have seen paranoia, the global affect of the noir films above, materially constituted by the systematic alternation of first- and third-person enunciations within a single shot. The fact that tone will always pose special difficulties as an *object* of analysis, particularly in the case of the frequently "atonal" texts foregrounded in this study of Bartlebyan feelings, does not imply that one must make its definition more positivistic: the concept's power resides precisely in its amorphousness. Accordingly, the goal of my first

chapter is not to make the concept of tone less abstract or less “noisy” but to develop a more precise vocabulary for the “noise” that tone is. My primary guide in this venture will be Melville’s last published novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857), a notably “talky” text that offers a useful allegory of the very problem enabling tone to do its aesthetic work. It demonstrates how feeling slips in and out of subjective boundaries in a series of transactions involving the exchange of writing and money for affective goods.

This book thus begins with what might be called a pre-affective question, by addressing one of the most important though under-examined aesthetic functions of feeling in general. After that, we will examine one of the most “basic” ways in which affect becomes publicly visible in an age of mechanical reproducibility: as a kind of innervated “agitation” or “animatedness.” On one hand, the state of being “animated” implies the most general of all affective conditions (that of being “moved” in one way or another), but also a feeling that implies being “moved” by a particular feeling, as when one is said to be animated by happiness or anger. Animatedness thus seems to have both an unintentional and intentional form. In a strange way, it seems at once a zero-degree feeling and a complex meta-feeling, which not only takes other feelings as its object, but takes only other *intentional* feelings as its object. For we can speak of someone’s being “animated” by a passion like anger, but not by an objectless mood like nostalgia or depression, which tend to have a de-animating effect on those affected by them.

In its associations with movement and activity, animatedness bears a semantic proximity to “agitation,” a term which is likewise used in the philosophical discourse of emotions to designate feeling prior to its articulation into a more complex passion, but that also underlies the contemporary meaning of the political agitator or activist. Yet while animatedness is bound up with questions of action—and even political action—in this general way, my primary focus will be on the social powerlessness foregrounded by its

racialized version. It is precisely this racialization that turns the neutral and even potentially positive affect of animatedness “ugly,” pointing to the more self-evidently problematic feelings in the chapters that follow. For as an exaggerated responsiveness to the language of others that turns the subject into a spasmodic puppet, in its racialized form animatedness loses its generally positive associations with human spiritedness or vitality and comes to resemble a kind of mechanization. At the same time, the minimal affect is turned into a form of emotional *excess*, and similarly stripped of its intentionality. Hence, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* it no longer matters what emotion, negative or positive, moves or animates the African-American slave; rather, his or her animated state itself becomes the primary object of the narrator’s quasi-ethnographic fascination. In this manner, the racialization of animatedness converts a way of moving *others* to political action (“agitation”) into the passive state of *being* moved or vocalized by others for their amusement. The disturbing consequences of this conversion are most forcefully demonstrated in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which draws on a “primal scene” of racial puppeteering to dramatize the death of a rising political leader, in a particularly violent account of the African-American “agitator” turned “animator” (or entertainer). Animatedness thus brings us back to the politically charged problem of obstructed agency that all the categories of feeling in this book will be used to interpret. It facilitates the transition from the general question of feeling in literature to the aesthetics of complex and highly particularized feelings such as envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplimity, paranoia, and disgust.

Given the predominant attention that critical work on emotion has devoted to the aesthetics of sympathy in recent years, we should note that it is precisely the obstruction of this “moral feeling” that “Bartleby” pointedly stages, as if Melville’s intent were to create a character so emotionally illegible as to foreclose the possibility of sympathetic identification altogether (and also, in an interesting way I will elaborate later, charity and pity). As the following chap-

ters pursue the Bartlebyan question of suspended agency beyond its nineteenth-century context through the twentieth century and into the present—where the figure of the Sub-Sub incarnated in the corporate employees in this introduction will morph, in a fashion that echoes the structure of *The Confidence-Man*, into an overly innervated factory worker, an envious temp, an irritated secretary, an anxious detective for hire, an exhausted would-be novelist, and a transcriber of responses to psychological questionnaires for a state-run psychiatric institute—they similarly highlight the limits of both expressiveness and identification, as my chapter on envy will draw out in particular. Here the work of emotion is taken up in another register of social difference—femininity—where it has seemed particularly overdetermined. Though both feminism and the patriarchal culture that is its constitutive outside have played roles in strengthening the association between emotion and women, the weight placed on this association also creates nervousness, with “women’s feelings” imagined as always easily prone to turning ugly. Envy is one of the most conventionally imagined of these feelings, I argue, though in a manner that reveals the moral constraints imposed on female aggression within feminism as well as by its adversarial outside. Through readings of recent feminist debates as well as classic writings on envy and group psychology by Klein and Freud, I show how the agonistic feeling can be used to explore the fraught issue of antagonism’s political value for feminism, and to disclose the limitations of sympathetic identification as our culture’s dominant way of understanding the making of female homosociality and the formation of political groups.

Harnessed into the constellation of multiple negative affects that make up Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment* (as defined in *On the Genealogy of Morals*), envy is perhaps this book’s most exemplary example of a politically equivocal feeling.³⁵ For *ressentiment* is Nietzsche’s account of how a kind of moral authority, one that transforms social weakness from an undesirable situation one must struggle to overcome into a “blessedness” or virtue (*GM*, 34),

“emerges from the powerless to avenge their incapacity for action, . . . enact[ing] their resentment of strengths that they cannot match or overthrow.”³⁶ It is an account, in other words, of how a problematic valorization of powerlessness as “good” can easily emerge from the same situation of “withheld doing” that produces the ugly feelings foregrounded throughout this book. Here, then, is a rejection of the sentimental politics of Stowe that parallels the antisentimental aesthetic of “Bartleby,” though made much more aggressively and from a very different place. There can be something useful, as Wendy Brown and other political theorists have stressed, about Nietzsche’s assault on the idea that there is something morally beatific about being poor, weak, or disenfranchised,³⁷ even though Nietzsche is not interested in how one might actually eliminate the conditions that produce this “slave morality” from the viewpoint of the slave.³⁸ But despite its superficial resemblance to the “vengefulness of the impotent” that is Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*, the ugly feeling of envy actually demonstrates that the two cannot be confused (*GM*, 37). For envy makes no claim whatsoever about the moral superiority of the envier, or about the “goodness” of his or her state of lacking something that the envied other is perceived to have. Envy is in many ways a naked will to have. In fact, it is through envy that a subject asserts the goodness and desirability of precisely that which he or she does not have, and explicitly at the cost of surrendering any claim to moral high-mindedness or superiority. Indeed, if envy and *ressentiment* have something in common, it is their shared status as targets of the very moral disapprobation (driven often by hate and fear) that Nietzsche summons the theory of *ressentiment* to attack. This correlates with what Jameson describes as *ressentiment*’s “unavoidable autoreferential structure,” where the manager resents his employee, and what he resents most about him is the employee’s *ressentiment*.³⁹ Hence, while the theory of *ressentiment* becomes productive for Brown’s critique of contemporary feminism’s “preference for moral reasoning over open po-

litical contest,”⁴⁰ it is ultimately on the side of Jameson’s much blunter assessment of the nineteenth-century ideologeme that my own book comes down: “That this ostensible ‘theory’ is itself little more than an expression of annoyance at seemingly gratuitous lower-class agitation, at the apparently quite unnecessary rocking of the social boat.” As an affective matrix devised as a “psychological explanation” for revolutionary or political impulses, which reduces social antagonisms to deficiencies of individual character or “private dissatisfactions,” Jameson notes, “the theory of *ressentiment*, wherever it appears, will always itself be the expression and the production of *ressentiment*.”⁴¹ Even if envy is not exactly the same feeling, then, as this moralizing pathos (though *ressentiment* is a matrix of a number of affects that can include envy), it is an antagonistic response to a perceived inequality easily discredited for similar reasons—especially, I argue, when the envious subject is a woman.

The political and aesthetic problems posed by the gendered and racialized feelings I examine in the chapters titled “Envy” and “Animatedness” converge in my discussion of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. The oft-noted psychological illegibility of the novel’s biracial heroine has led to critical perplexities rivaling those generated by *Bartleby*. Though thinkers from Aristotle to Audre Lorde have highlighted anger’s centrality to the pursuit of social justice, Larsen’s novel prefers the “superficial” affect of irritation—a conspicuously weak or inadequate form of anger, as well an affect that bears an unusually close relationship to the body’s surfaces or skin. Hyperbolized in Larsen’s image of her protagonist as “an obscene sore,” the novel’s irritated aesthetic enables us to continue the exploration of the ideologically fraught relationship between emotion, race, and aesthetics as it comes to a head in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. The *Bartleby* predicament of suspended agency persists in the following chapters, as I explore how the intellectual prestige of “anxiety” is oddly secured by a male analyst’s

fantasy of himself as a “thrown projection,” or passive body hurled into space, and as I also examine the paradoxical convergence of excessive excitation (shock) and the lack of excitation (boredom) in twentieth-century artforms ranging from Gertrude Stein’s *Making of Americans* to the late modernism of Samuel Beckett’s novels. While Kant’s sublime involves a confrontation with the natural and infinite, the unusual synthesis of excitation and fatigue I call “stuplimity” is a response to encounters with vast but bounded artificial systems, resulting in repetitive and often mechanical acts of enumeration, permutation and combination, and taxonomic classification. Though both encounters give rise to negative affect, “stuplimity” involves comic exhaustion rather than terror. The affective dimensions of the small subject’s encounter with a “total system” are further examined in the chapter titled “Paranoia,” where Melville’s scrivener reappears in the more contemporary guise of the poet-as-transcriber. He will return in person—but also as a figure for art itself, or rather the “harmlessness” that Adorno describes as the “shadow” of art’s “autarchic radicalism” in a fully commodified society—in my afterword, which discusses the ugliest of all ugly feelings: disgust. As the allegorical personification not just of art but art’s social inefficaciousness in a market society marked by the “pluralism of peacefully coexisting spheres”—the situation of limited agency from which all the ugly feelings and their attendant aesthetics ensue—Bartleby will preside over our final examination of the challenge that disgust’s aesthetic of the intolerable poses to what Marcuse describes as the friendly or “repressive tolerance” that makes the scrivener seem “safely ignorable,” for all his insistent negativity and ability to make his social invisibility as obtrusively visible as *Quicksand*’s “obscene sore.” Art thus comes to interrogate the problematically limited agency of art foregrounded in the aesthetics generated by ugly feelings, and in a fashion, I will argue, unparalleled by other cultural practices. Whether in a direct or indirect manner, this Bartlebyan problem is

one to which all of the following chapters will repeatedly return, even as animatedness, envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplimity, paranoia, and disgust are mobilized to investigate a multiplicity of other representational and theoretical dilemmas.