

## *Critical Response*

### *I*

## Like-Minded

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Ruth Leys (“The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 [Spring 2011]: 434–72) raises a number of important questions about the conceptual and empirical underpinnings of the affect theories that have emerged in the critical humanities, sciences, and social sciences in the last decade. There are a variety of frameworks for thinking about what constitutes the affective realm (neurological, psychological, social, cultural, philosophical), and there are different preferences for how such frameworks could be deployed. We would like to engage with just one part of that debate: the contributions of Silvan Tomkins’s affect theory. We take issue with Leys’s formulation that Tomkins’s work along with that of Brian Massumi, William Connolly, and Paul Ekman form a group of like-minded theorists. We do not believe this represents an accurate account of the conceptual and empirical commitments of these various authors. By bundling their work together, Leys misses much of what is compellingly critical in each of these writers, and she overlooks what is most invigorating in the debates amongst them. In addition, the specificities of Tomkins’s work have been badly served in Leys’s essay. In four volumes stretching from 1962 to 1992 (and elaborated in various other empirical and theoretical papers) Tomkins laid out a complex and captivating theory of the human affect system, in which mechanisms of neurological feedback, social scripts, and facial behavior coassemble as affective events. Our response to Leys’s essay is motivated by a wish to see more detailed engagements with this theory—the distinctiveness of which we believe has yet to be fully explored in this new affective turn.

In the first instance, we note, with some surprise, that Leys sees Tomkins as extensively influential on research in both the sciences and the critical humanities. If only. On our reading of the current scientific, social scientific, and critical humanities literatures on emotion, Tomkins's work has been either ignored or persistently misunderstood. Leys begins her essay by arguing that "for the past twenty years or more the dominant paradigm in the field of emotions [stems] from the work of Silvan S. Tomkins and his follower, Paul Ekman" (p. 437). We will return to Leys's descriptions of the precise character of this influence (for example, Tomkins's alleged contention that "affective processes occur independently of intention or meaning" or "our basic emotions do not involve cognitions or beliefs about the objects in our world" [p. 437]) and begin by contesting the first part of this claim: that Tomkins's theory has been a governing force in contemporary research on affect. Even a cursory review of contemporary psychology textbooks will show that references to Tomkins are incredibly brief.<sup>1</sup> These textbooks tend to envisage the history of psychological theory on emotion in a fairly uniform way. That is, after Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* the main theorization of affect in the twentieth century can be traced through the authorial pairs of James/Lange, Cannon/Baird, and Schachter/Singer. Tomkins's work is squeezed into this conventional narrative only to the extent that he is taken to revive the Darwinian (categorical) theory of emotion, and then his contribution is quickly (and, in our view, inaccurately) fused with that of Paul Ekman. These introductory texts also leave other important aspects of Tomkins's work unaddressed; his script theory and his extensive work in personality testing, for example, lie fallow.

1. See Henry Gleitman, James Gross, and Daniel Reisberg, *Psychology* (New York, 2011); Michael Eysenck, *Psychology: A Student's Handbook* (East Sussex, 2000); and Robin Kowalski and Drew Westen, *Psychology* (Hoboken, N.J., 2009) for typical treatments of Tomkins's contributions to the discipline of psychology.

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The specialist textbooks on emotion and personality theory barely improve on this accounting. The personality textbooks may summarize his script theory, and most will mention his employment at the Harvard Psychology Clinic under Henry Murray, but his extensive and reputable work on the Picture Apperception Test is all but ignored.<sup>2</sup> The emotion textbooks contain summaries of Tomkins's affect theory, but what we would like to note—as this bears directly on Leys's claims—is that all these texts take Tomkins's work to be part of the tradition in which a cognitive appraisal mechanism is central to emotional response. While this is a clear enough account of Ekman's work on emotion, it is a grave misunderstanding of Tomkins's. He and Ekman are very different theorists on this point. Tomkins certainly argues that cognitions combine with affects (“Cognitions coassembled with affects become hot and urgent. Affects coassembled with cognitions become better informed and smarter”);<sup>3</sup> however he was a strong critic of contemporary cognitive theories of affect appraisal. In volumes three and four of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* (published in 1991 and 1992 after the so-called cognitive revolution had swallowed the discipline of psychology whole), Tomkins is clear that he finds cognitive theories of affect evocation underpersuasive:

What is the cognitive appraisal when one is anxious, but does not know about what, when one is depressed or elated but about nothing in particular? Even more problematic for such theory is infantile affect. It would imply a fetus in its passage down the birth canal collecting its thoughts and, upon being born, emitting a birth cry after having appraised the extrauterine world as a vale of tears. [AIC, 3:56]

It is appraisal-based theories of emotion—not Tomkins's theory—that have dominated research on emotion these last twenty years or more.<sup>4</sup> We take Leys's heuristic of a “Tomkins-Ekman account of the emotions” (p. 440) to be a significant misconstruction.

2. See, for example: Dan P. McAdams, *The Person: An Introduction to the Science of Personality Psychology* (Hoboken, N.J., 2009); Irving B. Weiner and Roger L. Greene, *Handbook of Personality Assessment* (Hoboken, N.J., 2008); *The Cambridge Handbook of Personality Psychology*, ed. Philip Corr and Gerald Matthews (Cambridge, 2009); and Lawrence Pervin and Oliver John, *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research* (New York, 2001).

3. Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, 4 vols. (New York, 1962–92), 4:7; hereafter abbreviated AIC.

4. What counts as appraisal in the psychological literature on emotion varies somewhat. For his part, Ekman argues that appraisal (“in which we are constantly scanning our environment for those things that matter to us”) is a defining characteristic of emotion, even if such appraisal is usually automatic and nonconscious (Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* [New York, 2003], p. 216).

Following on from this, we find Leys's claim for Tomkins's influence over Ekman and thus over the scientists who draw on Ekman to be overstated. For example, the recent research on emotion in computational science tends to draw on categorical distinctions between basic affective states, and it is possible to draw a citational line that connects, say, Kismet (the "emotional robot" built at MIT in the 1990s) to Ekman, and then back to Tomkins.<sup>5</sup> But the crucial discovery here is that key aspects of Tomkins's affect theory in relation to shame, feedback, and cognition have not survived their relocation into computational models of emotion. It is Ekman, not Tomkins, who holds sway in these domains. We would like the important differences between Tomkins and Ekman to remain salient in discussions about affect theory; we would point out, as well, that Ekman's influence on scientists and nonscientists alike derives largely from those points where he diverges from Tomkins. Ekman's notion of basic emotions likely draws more sustenance from *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* than it does from *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. For example, Ekman's introduction to Oxford's two-hundredth-anniversary edition of Darwin's text insists on an antirealist agenda that would sound out of place in Tomkins's writing, in which universalizing intentions are considerably nuanced by a marked anthropological interest in personality and culture. Simply put, not all theories of basic emotion are alike; Leys's decision to group them together speaks more to her need to strengthen a rhetorical position than it accurately reflects the details of these bodies of work.

Similarly, and against Leys's claim for wide interdisciplinary influence, there is almost no sustained commentary on, or use of, Tomkins's work in the critical humanities. Irrespective of whether one is part of the affective turn or rallying against it, there is very little engagement with the particulars of Tomkins's theory.<sup>6</sup> Most often, in fact, Tomkins's theoretical claims are gleaned from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings rather than Tomkins

5. See Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle, 2010), chap. 2.

6. There is almost no mention of Tomkins in the most widely circulated books on affect; see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, 2004); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affect* (Durham, N.C., 2007); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004); *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, N.C., 2007); John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis, 2009); and *Political Emotions: New Agendas in Communication*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (New York, 2010). Similarly, the critiques of Clare Hemmings and Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard move over the specificities in Tomkins in order to focus on Sedgwick and Massumi; see Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548–67, and Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, "Biology's Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect," *Body and Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 29–56. In the recently published *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed.

himself; rarely does anyone engage the lengthy, difficult, and compelling prose in *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. Rarer still is any uptake of his work outside those four volumes (the studies on affect and smoking, for example, or his work on ideology). Our point is not that these authors *should* have used Tomkins's work; we simply note that they *do not*.<sup>7</sup>

All this makes Leys's claim about influence and like-mindedness hard to sustain. We feel that she shares with mainstream psychology an inclination for broad, synthesizing accounts of the history of affect theory, an inclination that tends to wash out the color and distinctiveness of these different intellectual positions.

We move now from Leys's claim about Tomkins's influence to her misunderstanding of several important aspects of his theory: the relationship between affect and object, the faciality of affect, and the place of intention or purpose (what Tomkins calls imagery) in his theory. First, Leys asserts that, for Tomkins, "affects are only contingently related to objects in the world: our basic emotions operate blindly because they have no inherent knowledge of, or relation to, the objects or situations that trigger them" (p. 437); she goes on to suggest that, in Tomkins's model, "the way to understand fear or joy is that they are 'triggered' by various objects, but the latter are nothing more than tripwires for an inbuilt behavioral-psychological response" (p. 438). Leys is right to note the importance of the notion of trigger for Tomkins but wrong in the way she casts the relationship between trigger and object in his theory; she appears to conflate a distinction that Tomkins carefully and crucially maintains. Tomkins reserved the word *trigger* to name the neurological process that occasions the experience of affect; in his quite general formulation, distinct gradients in "the density of neural firing or stimulation" are specific triggers for the affects of anger, distress, enjoyment, and so on (*AIC*, 1:251). This formulation permits him to arrive at one of the most productive aspects of his theory: the freedoms of affect with respect to time, intensity, combination, and (especially) object.

One of Tomkins's recurrent examples of the freedom of affect with respect to object is the infant's cry: the child who cries is not necessarily aware of the object of its distress. Is he or she hungry? wet? hot? cold? The various cries occasioned by each of these situations have similar neurolog-

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Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham, N.C., 2010) only two of the eighteen authors (Anna Gibbs and Megan Watkins) engage the details of Tomkins's work.

7. It is a small, perhaps petty, point to note that Tomkins's first and/or last names are frequently misspelled in the scientific, social scientific, and humanities literatures that make fleeting use of his work.

ical triggers—for Tomkins, this is how they are all cries of distress—but they have very different objects. When Leys suggests that “Tomkins-inspired theorists consider the affects to be capable of discharging themselves in a self-rewarding or self-punishing manner without regard to the objects that elicit them” (p. 438), she appears to be describing the dynamics of Sigmund Freud’s understanding of sexuality rather than Tomkins’s understanding of affect. The stability of the trigger permits any affect to have any object; any number of objects or situations can occasion similar neurological profiles. But once triggered, an affect comes to inform its object in a complex manner that Tomkins terms “affect-object reciprocity,” in which, as he puts it, “the object may evoke the affect, or the affect find the object,” leading to a “subjective restructuring of the object” (*AIC*, 1:133–34). This can hardly be described as affects behaving “without regard to the objects that elicit them.” Rather, the freedom of affect with respect to objects leads to the possibility of a motivational system of great flexibility.

Indeed, the key contribution that Tomkins’s affect theory makes to psychology is to the question of motivation. Charting a course between the psychoanalytic emphasis on the drives and the behaviorist insistence on stimulus/response, Tomkins argued that affects are the primary motivators of human behavior. While drives and cognitions both have motivational power, it is only when they are amplified by affect that a human being is moved to act, according to Tomkins. Consider the everyday example of hunger: often enough we realize our hunger only when we feel distress or irritation. When we eat, it is both to alleviate our hunger and to improve our mood—just as, if we like to eat good food, it is because we seek enjoyment as much as (or more than) the satisfaction of the hunger drive. In focusing on the basic emotions paradigm and assimilating Tomkins’s theory to Ekman’s, Leys does not address how Tomkins offers a new theory of motivation. Following from this, she overlooks the other crucial terms besides (and beside) *affect* in the title of his major work: *imagery and consciousness*.

We would like to correct an inaccurate assertion that Leys makes with regard to Tomkins’s understanding of the faciality of affect. She writes, in describing the basic emotions paradigm: “On this conception, when our facial expressions are not masked by culturally determined or conventional ‘display’ rules that control for appropriate social behavior, our facial displays are authentic read-outs of the discrete internal states that constitute our basic emotions” (p. 438). This is not how Tomkins understands the faciality of affect. One of his primary interlocutors on this topic is William James, for whom emotion mostly takes place internally, in the bodily organs. But Tomkins offers a different theory of the primary loca-

tion of affect: “affect is primarily facial behavior” (*AIC*, 1:205–6) or, as he puts it, “We regard the relationship between the face and the viscera as analogous to that between the fingers, forearm, upper arm, shoulders and body. The finger does not ‘express’ what is in the forearm, or shoulder or trunk. It rather leads than follows the movements in these organs to which it is an extension” (*AIC*, 1:205). The face does not serve, as Leys puts it, as a site for “read-outs” of “internal states,” and it is not only social display rules that make it difficult to read or recognize emotions. Rather, our tendency to experience multiple, contradictory affects at the same time, assembled with one another as well as with cognitions and drive states, makes facial affect difficult to assess. These complex emotional assemblages are embedded in scripts that serve to negotiate our motivational realities, and while these scripts may be somewhat visible on the face—the old-fashioned word for this would be *character*—they require interpretation, something which a good therapist might be skilled in. In addition, because for Tomkins the face (and the voice, though he does not address this in any detail) is where affect primarily takes place, his theory makes it possible to pursue a revised notion of emotional expression that does not require falling back into an idealized, self-authenticating interiority.<sup>8</sup>

Leys’s most charged contention is that intention has no place in Tomkins’s affect theory. But this is simply not true. Tomkins theorizes intention by way of what he calls the Image, defined as “a blueprint for the feedback mechanism: as such it is purposive and directive” (*AIC*, 1:122). Tomkins’s notion of imagery is indebted to first-order cybernetic theory in which purposes can be understood as emergent properties of some complex systems. We do not have the space to fully explicate Tomkins’s theory of the Image, but a brief example should help to clarify his distinction between affects (the primary motives) and Images (as specific goals or purposes). Consider that one of us experienced some anger and distress on reading Leys’s essay. These feelings served to motivate a response, but this response could have taken any number of forms (fuming to one’s partner, complaining to a colleague). In crafting this written reply we have a specific purpose: to correct what we perceive to be misrepresentations of Tomkins’s theory and its place in the critical and scientific literatures. We especially do not want graduate students who are forming their professional allegiances to be able confidently to dismiss “the affective turn” because it allegedly does not accommodate the role of intention. The particular Image we have in mind, then, is of a reader, either swayed by Leys’s critique or, perhaps, without the vocabulary or knowledge required to respond to

8. See Adam Frank, “Medium Poe,” *Criticism* 48 (Spring 2006): 149–74.

it convincingly, who reads this reply and can think more clearly about Tomkins's theory, and about the possible importance of having a viable affect theory (or theory of motivation) for criticism.

There would be more to say about the stakes behind Leys's insistence on a radical opposition between affect and intention (or *meaning* or *ideology*, terms which Leys tends to assimilate to one another) where there is none. No doubt an analysis of these stakes would begin with the citation, in footnote 31 (p. 451), to William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "affective fallacy": a moment of the highest New Critical attempt to scientize and purify literary criticism. Leys appears to be returning to that old defense of authorial intention as the only way to assign meaning to a literary text, a horse that was beaten to death in these pages more than twenty years ago. The spectacle would be amusing if it weren't so discouraging, if it didn't give the distinct sense that madness this way lies.