Poe's Affective Faces

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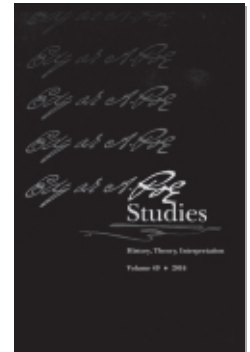
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Adam Frank. *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol*.
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The scope of Adam Frank's *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* is both wide and deep, emblematic of a project that weaves together analyses of literature and film through the lens of affect theory to traverse a range of historical periods. Over the course of four chapters, Frank explores the poetics of Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Andy Warhol; beginning in the 1840s and ending in the 1980s, Frank takes an unorthodox approach, but what unites these writers, thinkers, and artists, he argues, is "an acutely receptive and reflexive attention to the movement of feeling across and between text and reader, or composition and audience" [1]. Frank calls this phenomenon "transferential poetics," drawing on Silvan Tomkins's affect theory to develop the concept fully. Tomkins's system, he explains, is composed of "eight or nine innate affects as the more general biological motives in humans": "the negative ones, fear-terror, distress-grief, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, and contempt-disgust; . . . the positive ones, interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy; and the reorienting affect of surprise-startle" [5]. Tomkins locates affective responses primarily on the face rather than within the bodily organs; the face then is "the primary organ of affect, just as the lungs are the primary organ of respiration and the heart the primary organ of the circulation of the blood" [7].

Frank's chapter on Poe maps the facial dynamics of Poe's tales through this lens [52]. He quirkily begins with a reading of a comic strip from Jack Cole's *Plastic Man*, focusing on the character of Sadly-Sadly, whose supremely sad-looking face produces "a kind of instant contagion of affect" [49]. This invocation of Sadly-Sadly in the November 1949 strip is a refreshing way to begin a chapter on nineteenth-century affect—and representative of Frank's larger methodology of putting unlikely objects of study in conversation with one another. While the study as a whole appeals to a theoretically minded audience, readers of a historical bent will also benefit from the novel readings of canonical literary writers this methodology produces.

Frank tracks the peculiar and frequent description of faces throughout a number of Poe's tales, including "Ligeia," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," "The Man of the Crowd," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and

others; for Frank, "these long, mostly visual descriptions are bizarre, somehow never quite adding up, for what Poe's narrators seem to want to make perfectly clear is less a picture of a person than a problem with expression" [53]. Poe's narrators frequently "offer a minutely detailed depiction of the face of some beloved or compelling person within the tale's first few paragraphs, directly after confessing to the difficulties he has remembering origins" [53]. Anyone who has read "Ligeia" will find this observation thoroughly convincing: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia"; or, "Yet, although I saw that the features of Ligeia were not of a classic regularity—although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed 'exquisite,' and felt that there was much of 'strangeness' pervading it" [*Works*, 2: 310, 312]. What *is* the enigma of Ligeia's face, what *is* its strangeness? This question gets at what the chapter never fully articulates: the racial component of the face and its expressions. No one book can cover all topics, and while it is out of the scope of Frank's study, an analysis of the racial component of affect and facial expression would only enrich such a reading of Poe given the enigmatic ways in which Poe's stories often broach the topic of race.

Frank applies Tomkins's concept of the four "General Images" that guide the affect system described above to understanding Poe's technique. In Tomkins's affective constellation, the first Image seeks to maximize positive affect, the second minimizes negative affect, the third minimizes affect inhibition, and the fourth maximizes power to the other three images [59]. Concerning the first Image, Frank acknowledges that "it may strike readers of Poe as perverse to foreground something as pleasant or nice as the enjoyment of communion as central to his poetics," but the "first General Image of the affect system turns out to be a capacious category that happily includes a number of perverse possibilities" [60]. One way in which Poe's stories maximize the perverse side of positive affect is through the pleasure one gets out of expressing negative affects. In Tomkins's system, the second and third Images directly compete with one another: the negative affect inhibited in the second Image also needs to be released by the third Image, which seeks to minimize affect inhibition.

For Frank, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" exemplifies the ways in which his tales can be seen to work within these competing strains of Tomkins's General Images, producing a "transferential poetics" that startles and rewards readers. The primary organ of affect, the face of the old man, is what vexes the narrator; and like Poe's other nervous narrators, this one struggles to figure out what exactly is so unsettling. Unable to cohere the old man's facial features, he concludes that the problem has always been with his eye ("I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!") [*Works*, 3:792]. The anxious narrator cannot stop gazing furtively at the man's eye, and it is the taboo on looking, Frank argues, that

inspires such negative affect. The theatre supplies a space in which spectators can defy that taboo and gaze lengthily on the performers, and, so too, according to Frank, Poe's tale communicates the "theatrical risk in writing" [64]. Poe mimics this theatrical risk of prolonged looking at a subject by offering "a meditation on the murderous aim of getting rid of the evil eye, getting rid, therefore, of the shame-humiliation that accompanies the taboos on looking" [64]. By refusing to look away, refusing to dwell in the negative affects that catalyze murder, Poe provides a space for readers to derive pleasure and relief from minimizing affect inhibition, and this method is, in part, what makes his tales of horror so successful.

In the chapter that follows, Frank reads Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) alongside psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's *Experiences in Groups* (1961) to explore the shared poetics of the writers' approaches to group dynamics. In a chapter on Gertrude Stein, Frank reads her lecture "Plays" in relation to William James, Tomkins, and Bion, concluding that the problem of the theater, for Stein, "is the problem of thinking, knowing, and making emotional contact with groups" [114]. The final chapter, on Andy Warhol's poetics, argues that the artist adopts a "televisual perspective on emotion" that closely resembles Stein's idea of a "landscape poetics" [120]. Here, Frank circles back to the affective organ of the face in his reading of Warhol's *Screen Tests*, a series of four hundred silent film portraits that mimic the aesthetic of the passport photo, as the subject gazes into the camera after being told not to blink or move for three minutes. Warhol's constraints cause visible discomfort in his subjects: in the films, "affect takes place on the surface of the skin as a consequence of the filming process, its expression an index to the transferential relation between subject and camera" [124]. The subjects are framed from neck up, calling direct attention to the face and forcing the audience to partake in the uncomfortable experience of violating taboos on looking, which Frank connects back to Poe's magnification of negative affect—thus bringing *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* full circle.

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