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From Sensibility to Affect?

Theories of sympathy, as they develop out of reflecting on sensibility, encourage us, in turn, to consider the roots of the latter; and, in doing so, we will find that we are led into an intriguing miasma of cultural currents, out of which loom early signs of what was tentatively distinguished, in the first chapter, as a ‘spectacle of sympathy’ and a ‘circuit of sensation’. We will not find theoretical unification here – but, in pursuing this, we may find the endlessly recreated origins, the originating instances, of spectacle and sensation as they have been so prominent in the cultural life of the modern. And this, in turn, may help illuminate the revival of interest in embodiment and feeling in our own time, particularly in the context of the debates over the so-called ‘affective turn’, since affect, too, proves to have been a significant part of this early modern mix.

Making sense of sensibility is a challenge. For a start, sensibility does indeed ‘make’ sense, both in that it shapes the senses and, in doing so, is productive of culturally meaningful sense: it is the public face of the body. But it also faces inwards, both as expression of selfhood and as embedded within the organic. This ‘embodiment’ of sensibility produces and reproduces the body both as publicly legible and as deeply mysterious, both cultural and physical, both spectacle and sensation. The language of sensibility seems to combine feeling and emotion with physiology, a language of nerves and bodies, seemingly at once literal and metaphorical. ‘Sensibility is both the subjective awareness of experience and the organic sensitivity through which that awareness occurs’, suggests Van Sant. These analogies do indeed vividly criss-cross this language of body and mind: ‘touching the heart’ becomes electric, and involves ‘thrilling the nerves’, and ‘the structures of feeling (nerves and delicate fibers) become the location for experience.’¹ We can recall *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*: here we learn that ‘energetic sympathies’ go ‘darting from mind to mind’ with ‘electrical rapidity’; and one’s heart can be ‘touched, electrified’, just as one can catch the ‘soft contagion’ of tears.² All this is profoundly anti-Cartesian, and Christopher

Lawrence too notices this emphasis on monism, with ‘the nervous system itself as the bridge which possessed attributes of both mind and body’, and a term like ‘sensibility’ being used interchangeably to refer to properties of the nervous system or the ‘soul’. Nervous systems, perceptions and manners – all alike could be characterized as ‘coarse’ or ‘refined’.³ The absolute quality of the distinction between literal and metaphorical that we often – too often? – take for granted should not be transposed too readily into the eighteenth-century cultural context: the boundaries are unstable, the distinctions unclear, the resulting ‘figures’ of uncertain ontological status.

It was surely the Scottish Enlightenment, centred on Edinburgh and Glasgow in the middle years of the century, that was the prime centre for the source and diffusion of these intellectual currents as they became embedded in the discursive formations of the age, and came both to influence and to reflect cultural life and experience more generally. It was feeling, rather than reason, that was postulated as the basis of human actions, and of morality, and the nervous system mediated between self and other, body and environment. History itself emerged as a process of ‘gradual refinement of feeling’, with body and mind playing their integrated part in this development. And at this point we might appropriately return to Hume and Adam Smith, to deepen the elements of tension between their perspectives, presenting this as a clue to these deeper ‘currents’.

Intensity and reflection: Hume, Smith and their difference

Observing that our capacity to sympathize with distress is strong, Smith observes that ‘we weep even at the feigned representation of a tragedy’,⁴ and Hume’s account of our responses to the same situation can help sharpen our awareness of the implications of our emerging sense of the difference between them. Hume points to the puzzle here: ‘It seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy.’ Disputing Fontenelle’s claim that such tragedy can appeal because we know it is unreal, occurring ‘merely’ on the stage, Hume takes a speech of Cicero in which he gives an account of an episode of butchery of prisoners, and of the profound effects this has on his listeners, to argue that what matters is not that we know an event to be unreal – clearly it may not be – but, as in this case, the ‘force of oratory’ whereby it is communicated. In painting too, and the arts generally,

we can thus see how ‘The affection, rousing the mind, excites a large stock of spirit and vehemence; which is all transformed into pleasure by the force of the prevailing movement.’⁵ For Hume, our capacity for sympathy resides in the easy communicability, the *power*, of passion: ‘The passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movement in all human breasts.’⁶ The emphasis here seems clear enough; by contrast, here we have a passage from Smith, which is actually discussing the case of how one takes pleasure in the mirth, rather than the distress, of one’s companions:

Neither does his pleasure seem to rise altogether from the *additional vivacity* which his mirth may receive from sympathy with theirs, nor his pain from the disappointment he meets with when he misses this pleasure ... this correspondence of the sentiments of others with our own appears to be a cause of pleasure, and the want of it a cause of pain, which cannot be accounted for in this manner.⁷

In effect, we can say, in line with the analysis developed in the previous discussion, that it is the *relationship*, the pattern of ‘corresponding sentiments’, that is crucial – not the extra force that accrues from the process whereby the other’s feelings are transmitted. ‘Vivacity’ is the word to trigger our attention here; vivacity is not a Smith word, but it – and its cognates, such as vividness, liveliness and force – spatter the pages of Hume,⁸ and it is difficult not to see Hume as the target at this point.

Hume’s approach here comes close to the rather crude contagion model for the transmission of feeling which was widely influential in the eighteenth century, and clearly reflects, or implies, an adherence to sensationalist empiricism, whereby an identity of content is transmitted as a kind of imprinting (the ‘impress’ in ‘impression’) – hence Hume’s view that sympathy requires that one share the same feelings as the other.⁹ This can all be seen as an early philosophical formulation of an emergent cultural configuration, a powerful structure of experience and ideas, that emphasizes the significance in human life of the transmission of sensation. Nor can this configuration – particularly in its emergent or virtual stage – be mapped exclusively onto particular thinkers, artists or authors. For example, the emphasis on direct contact, immediacy, the physical or tactile dimension of transmission, also occurs in some examples used by Smith very early on in his account. He remarks that some people complain that ‘in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the correspondent

parts of their own bodies', and cases like this suggest that passions 'may seem to be transferred from one man to another, instantaneously' – which would also include sympathy.¹⁰ These are clearly *not* examples of 'thinking oneself into the situation of the other', which is how they are presented, and indeed Smith quickly proceeds to surer ground; but they well illustrate how texts can – and should – be read as complex cultural documents, indicators of conflicting cultural currents, as well as supposedly unitary philosophical treatises.

Of course, Hume's own development of this is philosophically sophisticated. So far, it may seem as if the mystery of representation – how to decode the signs of emotion in the other – is being 'resolved' by dissolving it into a kind of mechanical transmission, so that the 'idea' (of sympathy) is essentially just another (sensory) 'impression', and, as such, it can be made as instantaneous as possible, thus negating the distance that makes representation possible even as it makes it troublesome. Hume favours the image of a stringed instrument here: 'As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest ...' Nonetheless, there is an activity of mind present here, a capacity to copy, intervening as we move from the level of impression to that of ideas. Arguing that 'no passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind', but only indirectly, via causes and effects, which in the latter case means 'those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it', Hume suggests that it is these that give rise to our sympathy. In this process, 'Tis also evident, that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent, and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them'. That is to say, we form images or ideas of the feelings of others, and these ideas or images are converted back into feelings that *we* now possess, hence the sharing we characterize as 'sympathy', such sympathy being 'nothing but a lively idea converted into an impression'.¹¹

Laura Hinton can therefore suggest that, in Hume, 'The sympathetic device works not only through "vibration", but mimetically, through visual resemblance and identification'.¹² These two modes are not, after all, so far apart. Both operate so as to reduce distance; both operate in a quasi-mechanical way, giving little role to thought in general, or the imagination in particular. Ideas are copies of impressions, and mimesis interpreted as copying brings representation as close as possible to an immediate, physical, automatic process; it emphasizes the visual as an organic capacity, the eye as an organ, one sensory channel among others, and 'feeling' as an essentially 'unthinking' response to the power, the vivacity, of impression-as-idea. Indeed, while 'impression' and 'idea' are seemingly distinct in Hume, they are actually rather closely

assimilated; they are only distinguished by ‘force and vivacity’¹³ – that favourite Hume pairing – hence only by a difference of degree, ideas being really just weak impressions. Thus closely linked, similarity (*mimesis*, *idea*) and contiguity or proximity (‘vibration’, *impression*) are indeed important aspects of Hume’s analysis generally.¹⁴ We might cite Hume’s use of the mirror as a figure to capture all this, showing – in its revealing awkwardness, the tension of its imagery – the convergence of these two aspects of the circuit of sensation: ‘In general, we may remark, that the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other’s emotions, but also because those rays of passion, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees.’¹⁵

Smith, too, uses the mirror, but with a significantly different emphasis. In one of those characteristically eighteenth-century speculative experiments, he invites us to imagine a ‘human creature’ growing up in ‘some solitary place’. Lacking a mirror, he could acquire no sense of his own character, or any norms of behaviour. Yet, ‘Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before’. Previously, he could think only of the external objects of his passions; he could not reflect on these passions themselves. Nor could he anticipate new pleasures or sorrows. Once in society, however, his passions will become the causes of new passions, and he will observe that ‘mankind approve of some of them, and are disgusted by others’. Smith reflects on this process, and draws out the implications: ‘We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct.’¹⁶ For Smith, argues Griswold, ‘we always see ourselves through the eyes of others and are mirrors to each other. We are not transparent to our own consciousness; indeed, without the mediation of the other, we have no determinate moral selves “there” waiting to be made transparent.’ Self-knowledge depends on our understanding of others: ‘Sympathy is key to our self-conception.’¹⁷ And this, as David Marshall points out, is a two-way process: ‘the mirror of sympathy in which the spectator represents to himself the feelings of the other person and places himself in the position of the other is itself mirrored in the experience of the person who knows he is being viewed’.¹⁸ In these uses of the mirror to figure the sentimental foundations of society, then, the rays and reverberations of minds have been supplanted by the mutual gaze of self and other, selves *as* self and other to each other.

Thus Smith's myth of origin institutes a gulf between reflection and passion, a fundamental discontinuity rather than a difference of degree. And this discontinuity between thought and feeling is simultaneously constitutive of the self in relation to others. Passions no longer reverberate freely; a crucial element of distance is introduced. With Smith, 'spectatorial aloofness is made the condition of the operation of sympathy', claims Mullan, so 'the metaphor of spectatorial scrutiny is simply at odds with a version of sympathy which allows for the natural mutuality of passions and sentiments'.¹⁹ This practice of reflection involves both judgement and imagination, thinking ourselves into the situation of the other. And as the imagination manoeuvres in this gap, this discontinuity, so re-imagining the self in relation to its own passions becomes feasible, and new desires can emerge. The self-reflective imagination images – projects – our desires, thereby potentially transforming them.²⁰ Merish suggests that this model of social life requires 'a certain self-consciousness in one's emotional self-presentation, a certain theatricalization of one's inner life'.²¹ These selves are not integrated, not coherent, either in themselves or in relation to each other. This hall of mirrors refracts and distorts, and the reflected images may function as masks. Thus Griswold: 'We are not ourselves without the masks that sociality imposes, but that mask both reveals and conceals'.²² This Smithian myth of origin looks more and more like a thesis on the constitution of modernity ...

This imaginative engagement of the self, in 'becoming-other', is central to the possibility of sympathy, inviting vicarious identification, the play of identity across the gap, but we need to be careful in our interpretation of this. In this spectacle of sympathy, 'spectacle' is not about mimesis as mimicry, but as *theatricality*; vicarious identification is identity-in-difference, not identity per se, and any 'mirror' present here incorporates *distortion*, inherent in the idea of perspective, not narcissistic self-sufficiency.²³ One could say that spectacle is about incorporation (into relationship) rather than identification (with the other) and, given difference as distance, can readily encompass the idea of 'self' and 'other' as *scenario*, a place of theatrical enactment wherein feelings exist as manifested, as *shown*, available to an audience.²⁴ The 'showing', with a certain emphasis on the visual, is significant here, as the means whereby the 'inner' theatrical space of selfhood is mapped into the 'outer' scenario, the public persona (and vice versa). And, both as presented and appropriated in public, this involves the world of appearances and representations, the world of 'images' (in the several senses of that term).

And we can return here to the difference between Smith and Hume: the difference that may only be a hair's breadth, the minimal difference that makes

a difference, the difference of emphasis or focus that has such wide-ranging ramifications.²⁵ Smith is struggling towards a perspective in which feelings are always already ‘worked up’ by the imagination, as representations, for it is only thus that they become evidence of emotions and passions, the object of our sympathy. That is not to deny their status as bodily experiences, but to point out that they are not *only* that. In Hume, though, the emphasis tends to be on the original sensation or impression, seen as the founding moment, the ‘originating force’ in the origin. But even in Hume, passions themselves are impressions, sensations, that have been impregnated by ideas; they are the results of memory and imagination, working on ‘original’ sensations. Hume calls them ‘impressions of reflexion’, showing our emotions to be ‘impressed’ with our ideas, our images.²⁶ From this point of view, it is not a matter of ‘original’ impressions or sensations, direct, unmediated – nature rather than culture; rather, any ‘original moment’ here could be seen as a retrospective construct *we* impose, hence an intervention, a reflective distancing. This is the move Smith makes. And the point of this intervention, or its effect, is to mark a constitutive difference of perspective, whereby the immediacy of sensation and the reflective appropriation of sentiment can be moves *in* the circuit of sensation and the spectacle of sympathy, respectively.

For Smith, the reflective grasp of the imagination is crucial here; it institutes the very gap that it can then bridge vicariously and assess or contemplate ‘objectively’. It is within the imagination, working on the data of sensory experience, that the sense of *pattern* can form itself or be recognized. This is a pattern of superimposed homologies, similarities or relations between differences: other in relation to self; idea or image in relation to impression or feeling; the other’s response to his situation in relation to my response to mine.²⁷ It is the sense of these correspondences, ‘felt’ reflectively, that gives – or *is* – pleasure. It is this *aesthetic* dimension that emerges as basic to sympathy.

For Hume, though, the imagination is really just an aspect of the process of sensory transmission in which continuity is emphasized; differences are ultimately differences in degree, as in his claim that impression and idea differ only in intensity. And this points to the dynamic in Hume’s system: his emphasis on force, vivacity, with sympathy as the intensive power to convert idea into impression, feeling. To put it like this, invoking ‘intensity’ in this central role, is to give it a rather Deleuzian gloss; but it is also true that, in saying that the imagination in Hume is not active but that it nevertheless ‘rings out, and reverberates’,²⁸ Deleuze is colouring it in decidedly vivid, Hume-inflected prose. Influenced by Deleuze, Panagia writes that sympathy in Hume is ‘the principle

of composition that relates things through intensity – that is, on the basis of their difference, with ‘difference’ to be seen here, one might add, as something like an original differentiation between quanta of energy. Difference is still crucial, but it is intensity that does the work: it is the ‘differentiating force that allows dissimilars to coincide’. Hence ‘The social is the domain of sympathy where the intensity of difference makes its appearance.’²⁹ With intensity, suggests Boundas, ‘force overtakes form’,³⁰ a phrase that encapsulates this difference of emphasis between Smith and Hume. And intensity, one might add, runs back through to the shock of the initial sensory experience itself, the initial ‘encounter’.³¹

Let us now trace these differences – or these traces of difference – further back through the maelstrom of the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, particularly as appropriated by the language of science and medicine, and see if any further sense can be made of them.

Nervous bodies

The suggestion that ‘sensibility draws on the fundamental analogy in the language between physical and psychological feeling, an analogy that suggests cause without ever entirely giving way to it’ alerts us to underlying problems; so does Van Sant’s further hint that ‘physical structures are the location of responsiveness, and their delicacy determines the delicacy and immediacy of feelings; but nerves do not *cause* the emotions, passions, etc.’³² Via sensations, nerves provide ‘occasions’ for feelings and emotional responses, one might say, without determining their content or mode of expression. And covering this gap with the language of ‘vibration’, much favoured at the time, is merely to substitute a figure for a mystery – not that this in any way diminishes its vividness, the power it derives from this very obscurity at its core. We are beginning to touch on tensions fundamental to the whole tradition of sensationist empiricism stemming from Locke, and this is basic to our understanding of the source not only of the circuit of sensation but the spectacle of sympathy as well.

This may become clearer if we suggest an analogy with a related tension that is apparent in an influential work by one of Locke’s followers, Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749).³³ For Hartley, an idea is an ‘internal representation’ of some sensation, and ‘simple’ ideas give rise to more complex ones through a ‘coalescing of vibrations’, hence ‘association’, and indeed the ‘associative power of words’ is central to this.³⁴ Again, the language of ‘vibration’ and ‘power’ alerts us to the problem: the gap between sensation and its appropriation as

representation, which cannot plausibly be accounted for by 'cause', yet points to the necessity for this as the price of not allowing any idea of mind as faculty, or a capacity for representation, with systematizing attributes, to play a part here. The problematical role of language in this appropriation is critical: words seem to have mysterious properties ('associative powers') irreducible to the impact of particular sensory experiences. Indeed, if there are relations, 'analogies', between these problems, this very mode of expressing it may well be a significant clue.

Relations, connections: as suggested previously, it is above all through the language and imagery of 'nerves' that these terms and these problems in the understanding of feeling, emotion and the body come to the fore in eighteenth-century culture, and provide a route into how the culture tries to make sense of its own assumptions. What we find is that 'The nervous connection of different parts and organs produces the body as an analysable whole,' as Mullan puts it.³⁵ Newton had originally provided sensational psychology with its understanding of nerves, arguing that they were solid and transmitted sense impressions by vibrations; and the language of nerves had increasingly replaced that of humours. 'Sensibility' itself, as a cultural construct, 'connoted the operation of the nervous system, the material basis for consciousness,' a consciousness 'responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body,'³⁶ and Barker-Benfield's point can be exemplified by the way novelists like Richardson, Fielding and Smollett, along with theorists like Burke, drew extensively on 'nerves' in their work. Along with 'vibrations' and 'impressions', this shared language of expression testifies to the spread of this paradigm in literary culture. For the influential physician Alexander Munro, sensibility could be located in the physiological organization of the nervous system; in his *Structure and Function of the Nervous System* (1783) he claimed that the 'great sympathetic nerve' transmitted messages from all round the body.³⁷

By the end of the century, the language of electricity is proving highly compatible with this dominant paradigm, and Vincent-Buffault suggests that 'It was by transposing the discoveries about electricity into the human body that doctors adopted this idea of a nervous fluid which sometimes came close to magnetism,' and sensitivity was like a fluid which 'ebbed and flowed' in channels.³⁸ 'Electricity' is indeed an appropriate resource for the language of sensation here, posited as a figural reality that may not be entirely metaphorical; as a principle of attraction, it was widely seen as a 'current' and indeed, by Benjamin Franklin himself, as a 'subtle fluid diffused through all bodies.'³⁹ Drawing on a lifetime of research in this area, George Rousseau could conclude

that 'the nervous system became the battlefield on which civilization and its discontents would be played out'.⁴⁰

If the Scottish Enlightenment was indeed influential, Scottish medicine was at the core of this. According to Lawrence's survey, it emphasized 'the total integration of body function, the perceptive capacity or sensibility of the organism, and a preoccupation with the nervous system as the structural basis for these properties'. Robert Whytt, physician to George III and professor at Edinburgh in mid-century, had been formulating these doctrines from the 1740s and became their major source, though his successors through the century adapted and developed the general approach. Rejecting the Cartesian reduction of body to mere mechanism, Whytt argued that only if 'soul' was reintroduced, on a scientific basis, so as to be seen as extending through the whole nervous system, could the whole range of the body's emotional capacities and responses be accounted for. Hence his postulation of a 'sentient principle', an 'immaterial, undivided substance that could "feel" stimuli and necessarily directed the appropriate response', and this became 'the seat of overall control and integration of body function', as Lawrence summarizes it.⁴¹ Foucault's discussion of Whytt adds a key term: 'This very distinct property of both "the faculty of feeling and that of moving" which permits the organs to communicate with each other and to suffer together, to react to a stimulus, however distant – is sympathy.' Such sympathy 'exists in the organs only insofar as it is received there through the intermediary of the nerves; it is the more marked in proportion to their mobility, and at the same time it is one of the forms of sensibility'.⁴² Hence, as Bruhm puts it, 'Physical sentience became the raw material of sympathy – that joining together of all aspects of the body in fellow-feeling'.⁴³ And Foucault adds that, for these physicians, this 'internal sensibility' of the system is particularly likely to be manifested in brain and womb, the organs that maintain 'most sympathy with the whole organism',⁴⁴ reinforcing the sense that the gendered aspects of all this are highly significant.

'Sympathy', such a key player here, has earlier roots. In seventeenth-century medicine, it was already being criticized for postulating 'action at a distance', and for implying 'mysterious affinities' between organs⁴⁵ – an interesting combination of attributes, given the later emergence of the tensions between 'sensation' and 'sympathy'. Whytt tries to re-establish the notion on firmer foundations. In formulating his 'sentient principle', he claims that 'we know certainly, that the nerves are endued with feeling, and that there is a general sympathy which prevails through the whole system; so there is a particular and very remarkable *consent* between various parts of the body'. Thus, he adds,

‘every sensible part of the body has a sympathy with the whole.’⁴⁶ This imagining of the feeling body and its internal relations and interconnections in the language of ‘consent’ is striking, and commentators, in turn, produce rhetorical flourishes to capture it; thus Foucault refers to Whytt’s ‘nervous system’ as ‘the body’s sensibility with regard to its own phenomena, and its own echo across the volumes of its organic space.’⁴⁷ Perhaps Roger French’s use of ‘awareness’ gets us closer: Whytt’s principle of ‘general sympathy’ was ‘not a mechanism of bodily co-ordination but ... an “awareness” of the sensible parts of the body by each other.’⁴⁸ So there is a reflexive grasp here, a kind of body consciousness whereby the separate constituents can somehow grasp a sense of the whole, perhaps indeed constitute themselves *as* a whole, through this awareness. It may be that something of this can be captured by the more recent concept of ‘body-image’. Simon Williams claims that ‘The lived experience of emotion ... is mediated through body-image’:⁴⁹ sensations, tactile impressions, visual images, give us a sense of the relations between the body and its surrounding spaces, the ‘echo across the volumes of its organic space’ referred to by Foucault. One of those who pioneered this concept, Paul Schilder, calls it ‘the body schema ... the tri-dimensional image everybody has about himself’, adding that it involves representation but is not reducible to it.⁵⁰

In the light of this, one can note that the ‘particular and very remarkable *consent*’ that Whytt observes does indeed seem to refer to something like a ‘shared image’, as though each part of the body, in its awareness of the whole of which it is part, reflexively produces a sense of this whole *as* image. An even more vivid – and, to our eyes, strange – way of expressing this can be found in this excerpt from one of Whytt’s physician contemporaries, Jerome Gaub, describing ‘neural man’. This ‘person’ (or perhaps entity, or principle), is:

... distributed throughout the entire body and so intermingled with each of its parts that if separated from these parts it could present a simulacrum or skeletal image of a man. Furthermore, this structure of nerves is no less animated from within by its motive power than it itself stirs up the rest of the body’s inert mass throughout which it extends. In this sense it represents a kind of man within a man.⁵¹

This is an arresting image of man *as* image, of a simulacrum of the body that can be produced from anywhere within the body yet also apart from it, the simulacrum as the idea of the image that is impossible to place, immanent within the body yet an emanation of it: the anywhere and nowhere of the image, that, in a sense, we now take for granted. What challenges us is the literalness of

this image of an image; that it is somehow image *and* organic, latent in all parts of the body as the carrier or manifestation of the body's sense of itself. And it turns out that this self-aware body is now one that is not only open to its own gaze, but to that of the other, and Whytt himself draws out the intriguing implications: 'there is a still more wonderful sympathy between the nervous systems of different persons, whose various motions and morbid symptoms are often transferred from one to another, without any corporeal contact.'⁵² Whytt's idea that this image can carry a 'wonderful sympathy' by some direct transference between bodies, without physical contact, seems even more mysterious. The claim that we can influence one another's feelings seems uncontentious enough; the idea that the specific *content* of these feelings can be transmitted directly, body to body, let alone in these necessarily specific images, is something else again.

Changing imaginations

We can get a better understanding of the process involved here if we introduce the concept of the imagination, for in effect what we are encountering here is a transition between an early or pre-modern perspective on the status and powers of the imagination and a modern one. On the earlier model, what appears in the imagination mimetically affects the body; the imagination is a perceptual mechanism for the transmission, via 'impression', of sensation. As late as 1797, an entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* appealed to this notion of a 'sympathetic imagination' as the explanation for bodily deformity ('monsters'), citing an old example from Malebranche of a pregnant woman who had watched a criminal's limbs being broken; as a result, her infant's limbs were found to be broken in the same way. The entry could then claim that 'the view of a wound ... wounds the person who views it'⁵³ or, as Logan puts it, 'The material effects of this sympathetic mimesis are dramatized in the body of the child'. So, on this model, 'any distinction between realities and representations is lost, as representations have the ability to cross over into the status of realities', since what matters is that the idea or image be 'vividly present', whether or not the object is.⁵⁴

We have to be careful in locating where precisely the difference between this and the modern imagination lies. After all, 'vivid presence' is also what the contemporary reader or filmgoer experiences when reacting emotionally to something known to be 'unreal'; fictional figures can engage our imaginations,

and move us. The real difference comes from the twin requirements, in the former model, that the imagination operate in a strictly mimetic manner, and that this occur in ways that are continuous with the organic mechanism of body reactions generally. The 'impression' left by a sensation in the imagination – resembling, say, that left by a stamp in a bed of wax – is then copied, transferred from the imagination to some appropriate organ of the body, via the nervous system. Citing Alexander Crichton's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement* (1798), Logan suggests that internal impressions reproduce, via nerves, the effects of external impressions, and that this thereby 'provides an explanatory underpinning for the belief that the physical effect of an idea is identical in kind to the physical effect of the thing for which it substitutes'.⁵⁵ And this essential continuity in kind between the imagination and the nervous system doubtless enhances the plausibility of Gaub's account from earlier in the century, whereby nerves and organs can somehow bear the 'impression', as image, of the body as a whole. And this model has wide ramifications. The idea of 'involuntary mimesis' could provide a clue to nervous disorders, through the suggestion that 'retained impressions' of unfortunate and repeated sensations could worsen the original effect.⁵⁶ And, more speculatively, unconscious imitation could trap the 'man of feeling' into an unacceptable perversion of himself: 'Imitation of feeling is by definition affectation', as Van Sant puts it.⁵⁷ Novelists like Richardson, Fielding and Sterne were widely criticized for encouraging such imitation, albeit unwittingly.

And the alternative? This focuses rather more on the relative independence of the imagination, as a faculty or capacity. In particular, the imagination becomes a capacity for diverging from mimesis, realizing the non-mimetic in the mimetic, introducing difference into the same, hence anticipating Romantic ideas of creativity; but it does this *within* the mind, or as an aspect of it. What the imagination loses, in direct contact with the physical world, it gains in greater autonomy. But there is also an element of obscurity, both because of its link with that other nebulous entity, the mind, and because, in the eighteenth-century context of its origin, all this tended to remain at best implicit in what continued to be the culturally dominant stream of sensationalist empiricism. And a perhaps unexpected corollary of all this is that it reveals sensationalist empiricism itself – heir to the Scientific Revolution, the epistemological cutting edge of advanced ideas of progress and Enlightenment – as having striking continuities with the *older* model of the imagination; indeed, it is arguably unable to come up with an adequate theory of 'imagination' at all, reducing it, essentially, to a mechanical, combinatory response to the input of sense data.

The emergence of the newer model can be associated with a greater emphasis on the imagination in relation to sight, with the status of the latter as the dominant sense being asserted all the more strongly as the 'civilizing process' gradually enforced greater distrust of those senses that seemed to testify to a potentially 'excessive' presence of the body (touch and, particularly, smell). Not only did the visual image come to seem the basic raw material of the imagination, but we can see that the balance of distance with proximity, detachment with vividness and immediacy, that we associate with the visual sense, seem to be particularly suited to the discourse and experience of sympathy and sensibility. For contemporaries, no doubt, it was often the immediacy that was emphasized. Thus for Samuel Johnson, and many others, suggests Van Sant, 'sympathetic feelings, which require vividness and proximity, arise through an act of the imagination largely dependent on sight'.⁵⁸

This is not straightforward, however. Here it would be useful to consider the claim running through Van Sant's invigorating account that the culture of sensibility incorporated two identifiable strands, one emphasizing the sense of sight and the significance of the visual, and the other the sense of touch, which was closely linked to the cult of feeling. She argues that this second theme has a certain priority: 'Sensibility defines all sensory and emotional experience as forms of touch ... Interest in scenes of suffering shifts from the spectatorial event to the experience of that event in the body of the spectator'.⁵⁹ The 'embodiment' of feeling entailed the proximity of touch. And just as we know that 'seeing' has a powerful resonance in our culture, so too does 'touch': Ahmed reminds us that 'What connects us to this place or that place, to this other or that is also what we find most touching; it is that which makes us feel'.⁶⁰ And the 'makes us' again conveys this metonymic, causal dimension, the sense of links in a chain. It may be that after the era of sensibility, 'touch' came to be relatively devalued, but it retains powerful cultural resonance.

While this is a useful corrective to the tendency to neglect this dimension, it may be more accurate to suggest, rather, that there is a *tension* between these two strands. This is another aspect of the tension that has been outlined above, underlying the contrast of spectacle with sensation. Indeed, Van Sant points out that while Locke and his followers tried to explain sight in the language of sensationalist materialism, so that sight is, in effect, a form of touch, nonetheless it is not *experienced* as such, so that 'descriptions of the mind's way of dealing with sensory material still use the visual term *image*'.⁶¹ If one becomes aware of this tension, then the strains and incongruities in empiricist texts as they endeavour to incorporate the language of image – and, more generally, of mind

as it reflects on, and manipulates, imagery – can become peculiarly vivid: it is as if the imagination, as the power of mind to engage with the visual, is being called into being even as it is denied theoretical status. The problem of capturing reflexive image-making in the metonymic language of causation clearly has widespread ramifications.

Attempting to draw all this together, we can say that early modern ideas of a ‘sympathetic imagination’, with the power to directly transmit the image of the shape and form of one body into the shape and form of another (as with ‘monstrous births’), are increasingly challenged by a radical reshaping of the imagination into a ‘faculty of mind’, now equipped with powers that can seem more limited, but actually open up the whole zone of the imagination for intense artistic and scientific creativity, and for structuring the inputs of experience. This, in turn, implies a radical bifurcation of ‘sympathy’. It is no longer a diffuse sense of wholeness, an overall feeling transmissible in a quasi-physical way to others, or a term for the transmission of pockets of nervous energy within the body, ensuring links and coordination. Either it becomes *simply* a feeling, the result of ‘nervous powers’, the energy of sensation, reacting to sensory impressions made on the body, particularly through touch, with representation dissolved into mechanical transmission; or it becomes a feeling that necessarily and crucially involves the imagination, as well as the body, with an emphasis on the visual sense, but now an imagination that incorporates the internal power of image-making, and a vicarious ‘imagining’ of the other with feelings that are already worked up as representations. In the latter case, ‘mind’, as judgement and imagination, plays a relatively autonomous role, described in terms of faculties of the self, whereas in the former case it becomes essentially reducible to effects of sensationalist physical and psychological processes.

In short, while the suffering victim, as object of our sympathy, should be both seen *and* felt, as it were, there seem to be two different ways of making sense of this, ways that rarely become directly *incompatible*, but are rarely easily compatible either; and the tension here defines the whole culture of sensibility. On the one hand, we encounter the circuit of sensation; on the other, the spectacle of sympathy. These strands are emergent, overlapping, but real enough, in their differential impacts. It is the stresses produced by the coexistence of these strands that gives a distinctive flavour to so many of these texts, whether in science or medicine (Whytt, Gaub), philosophy (Hartley, Hume), social or moral theory (Smith), or literature (Hays, Richardson, Sterne), even while some of these authors seem to be more clearly on one side or the other of the division (hence the strategy, adopted here, of contrasting Hume

and Smith). It is 'sensibility' that holds together – but cannot fuse – these two strands. As they become more distinct, so sensibility itself, in its eighteenth-century sense, which only ever *was* this precarious coexistence, fades away, or, more accurately, becomes dispersed into strands that reflect this origin, while also being transformations of it: sensationalism, sentimentality, and 'civility' (as conventional manners, increasingly divorced from its role as signifier of underlying feeling).

But let us now turn to another term from the early modern, one that has come back into prominence in our own time ...

Towards affect

From private feeling to public display of emotion, 'sensibility' thus designates a whole cultural orientation, one never free of tensions. The term itself develops from within the confusing undergrowth of feeling-terms that are a feature of the early modern development of a more secular and neutral set of concepts out of theologically inflected ones. Words like 'affection' and 'sentiment' bridged the gap between thinking and feeling, and 'affect' has a role here too. 'Affection' has a long theological history, from Augustine and Aquinas, generally designating the 'higher' faculties, the activities of the soul, potentially related to reason, and the 'passions', and contrasting with the 'lower', animal 'appetites'.⁶² Affects are related to this, but with more fluidity and flexibility; and they do indeed continue to exist, in this rather vague and under-specified way, until being revived, at least in academic circles, in recent decades.

The dictionary offers further clues here. In effect, there are two core meanings for 'affect', as a verb: to act upon, have an effect on, disturb (Latin *afficere*), and to put on an appearance, make a pretence of, profess (*affectare*, related to *afficere*). Hence the nouns 'affect' and 'affection', which can refer to a state of body and/or mind, but also, related to the second meaning, an 'affectation' (with 'affected' being related to either). Once again, the realization, manifestation or appropriation of 'affect' in its context raises the issue of theatricality and display, making out and making up. As expressed, given form, affect becomes both excessive to meaning and inadequately captured by it, with theatricality as the code through which this tension is 'managed'. Thus the relation to 'affectation': one is drawn towards something, has a tendency in a certain direction, hence changing one's external appearance or behaviour, however unconsciously. In this sense, affect raises the whole issue of 'expression' as a relation of inner content to

public form. And here, one can already see a gulf opening up: for this second dimension has – ostensibly at least – been lost in the contemporary ‘affective turn’, with its emphasis on psychological or even physiological states, manifestations and processes, and the possibilities of direct interpersonal transmission, essentially unmediated by cultural expression.

This contemporary prominence of the term has, rather intriguingly, involved a return to a thinker who preceded the heyday of sensibility, namely Spinoza, whose alleged materialism, and assimilation of God and Nature, led to his near-universal condemnation in his own time. Proponents of the affective turn have generally invoked him as the founding father, and ground their use of ‘affect’ in an interpretation of his work, particularly emphasizing the alleged ‘autonomy’ of affect.⁶³ It would consequently be of interest to see whether Spinoza can accommodate such a reading, or whether his own work, too, reveals something of the tensions mentioned above, and revealed in the apparently minor differences between Hume and Smith that nevertheless have such profound implications. In doing this, the influential interpretation offered by Deleuze, which has been basic to the contemporary appropriation of Spinoza’s ideas in this field, will be both drawn on and, in part, challenged.

We can approach Spinoza’s perspective on affect by starting from the linked term, ‘affection’. Here, an old use of the word, given in the dictionary, is for it to refer to a contingent, changeable state or quality of something, a use clearly linked to the first meaning of affect indicated above, to act on or influence. An affection, then, would be the state or feature of something that results from the impact of something else. At the most basic level, in Spinoza’s system, the modes (individual manifestations of substance) are defined through their capacity to manifest such states and, therefore, their relations to other such: ‘By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.’ One might add that the distinctiveness of Spinoza already emerges on this, the first page of the *Ethics*, in the way a quasi-physical description is replicated in conceptual, relational terms, revealing his key assumption that there is but one, unitary substance (albeit differentiated into modes), described under the attributes of Thought and Extension: in effect, one world, perceived under two perspectives. And this is also clear in what these affections are further said to entail, in practice. A physical object or other body, he writes, will produce an ‘impression’ on another, leaving ‘traces’, adding that ‘the affections of the human body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things ... and when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.’⁶⁴ Hence we find that the imagination, as

the foundation of thought, is present with affection, as the condition of embodiment (extension), at the very origin of experience.⁶⁵

At this point, Spinoza introduces a distinction between affection and what seems to be presented as a distinct *form* of it, affect: 'By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.' If, in the case of the diminution of the capacity for action, the body can be said to experience passions, it is nonetheless the case that affect is presented as a process or passage that is also active, an act.⁶⁶ Thus, when an affection makes us feel sad, it decreases our power of action; when it makes us feel joy, it increases it. Indeed, joy and sadness best express the duality here, and indeed are said to be two of the three basic affects.⁶⁷ Offering a clarification or expansion of this, Deleuze suggests that if an affection (*affectio*) is a 'corporeal image', then 'From a given idea of an affection there necessarily flow "affects" or feelings (*affectus*)'. Such feelings are a new kind of affection, incorporating a relation to an earlier state. 'Our feelings are in themselves ideas which involve the concrete relation of present and past in a continuous duration: they involve the changes of an existing mode that endures.'⁶⁸

One could say that there are two aspects to this: there is the initial impact *on* the body, along with the response *of* the body, mapped as 'feeling'; and then there is the fact that this involves a process of change, and that this, too, is inherent in the response. Part of what we are doing, subjectively or unconsciously, when we register a feeling, is that we are noticing this element of contrast. Thus Deleuze suggests that affect 'is experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states.'⁶⁹ It might be tempting to gloss this as a simple cause/effect relation, but this is misleading: it suggests that affect is merely another state, separate but resulting from the initial affection. For Spinoza, within the rationalist tradition, 'cause' is far broader, and can include internal relations of implication and expression. As the process whereby the body 'makes sense' of the *affectio*, the *affectus* incorporates it, orients us towards it, all of which is implicit in 'responding' to it.⁷⁰

In the light of this, we can consider a conclusion drawn by Deleuze in the shorter and more influential of his two books on Spinoza: 'Hence there is a difference in nature between the *image affections* or *ideas* and the *feeling affects*, although the feeling affects may be presented as a particular type of ideas or affections ...' There is a palpable tension here, bursting through in the phrase 'difference in nature', pointing up the awkwardness of the deviation from Spinoza indicated by the first part of the formulation. Hitherto, the two pairs of

terms – affections and affects, ideas and bodies – have been shown to be closely interrelated and overlapping, both in Spinoza and in Deleuze's exposition. But now it seems as though affect has broken free, into its own independent sphere, lack of authorization from Spinoza's text notwithstanding. The ground for this move, though, has been laid in what has been quoted above. The contrast between *affectio* as a state and *affectus* as change, process or *duration* (Deleuze's preferred term) is further emphasized by the emphasis on affect as 'purely transitive', and 'experienced in a lived duration', and this is clearly the core of this, pointing indeed to a further significant shift of emphasis. Now, we learn that these states, these 'image affections', are 'not separable from the duration that attaches them to the preceding state and makes them tend towards the next state.'⁷¹ Affect is here seen as having the potential to subsume the sphere of image affections in an enveloping ontology of process.

In due course, this fusion of affect and process will turn out to be the crucial aspect of Deleuze's philosophy as it has come to influence the debates in the 'affective turn' of our own time. In this powerful synthesis of Spinoza and Bergson, we will be presented with an overall picture of a reality in which everything is always becoming, in processes whereby the virtual, in becoming actual, reveals itself through the 'affect' that manifests the transition yet is lost in the very actualization of the virtual state, and that always subverts any images or representations that purport to capture it; and in this perspective, 'affect' has lost its connection with images, and even feelings, its 'autonomy' manifest as a directly visceral transmission of energies and intensities between bodies. In so doing, this perspective loses sight of the embeddedness of affect in a relation with affection, with states of the body, thoughts and feelings, a relation which many of Deleuze's formulations, at this early stage in his career, would seem to imply,⁷² as we have seen.

Affect, imagination and reason

To pursue this, let us return to Spinoza, and consider this passage: 'Since man ... is conscious of himself through the affections by which he is determined to act, then he who has done something which he imagines affects others with joy will be affected with joy, together with a consciousness of himself as the cause ...'⁷³ The first part of this implies that the positive or negative energy involved in the passage or transmission of image affection into feeling affect is inseparable from an emergent sense of self: in becoming aware of the feeling, I also become aware

of myself-becoming-aware, even if this sense of myself as a subject of experience has, so far, no content beyond the experiences themselves. Here we can recall that the image affection is *already* a relation, between the impact of the other and the body that receives the impact, even if the impression left, as image, is necessarily partial, only seen from the viewpoint of the recipient. As Brian Massumi puts it, the initial affection is ‘immediately, spontaneously doubled by the repeatable trace of an encounter ...’, making memory possible, and ‘it is only when the idea of the affection is doubled by an *idea of the idea of the affection* that it attains the level of conscious reflection’.⁷⁴ For Antonio Damasio, this ‘opens the way for representing relationships and creating symbols’ – in particular, that of the self.⁷⁵

The flow of images at the heart of this, and the reference to the imagination in the second part of the Spinoza quote, require further consideration. The imagination manifests itself in the transience and contingency, but also the vivacity and intensity, of the images that constitute it; above all, it registers *presence*. Even though the object itself may be absent, to imagine it is always to register it as present: ‘even though things do not exist, the mind still imagines them always as present to itself, unless causes occur which exclude their present existence’.⁷⁶ And here we can bring in the link to affect again. Since affects involve increases or decreases in energy, just as the imagination can fluctuate in the vividness of its images, so the relation between them can have important implications.⁷⁷ Spinoza remarks that when, in the light of reason, the mind understands something to be necessary, ‘it has a greater power over the affects, or is less acted on by them’;⁷⁸ whereas conversely, with the imagination, where ‘presences’, things or spectres, have all the power of ‘presence’, albeit with a more uncertain ontological status, our feelings are more strongly affected. Following Spinoza, Deleuze adds that ‘the active feelings born of reason ... are in themselves stronger than any of the passive feelings born of imagination’, and since ‘an active joy always follows from what we understand’;⁷⁹ this provides a stimulus to further thought and the production of rational ideas, which bring further pleasure in train. This process of active reasoning starts from uncovering what we have in common with the other, enabling us to go beyond the limitations of the image that merely reflects its impact on us, and produces positive affect; and this can, in turn, spur us on to understand disagreements, disparities and negative affects, even though we would normally, of course, want to avoid the latter.

In particular, we can now consider pity – that form of negative affect intimately related to feelings for the other. ‘Pity is a sadness, accompanied by the idea of an evil which has happened to another whom we imagine to be like us’;⁸⁰

and compassion could be described as the ‘habitual disposition’ that can result from this. This requirement of similarity may be less restrictive than it seems: we have already seen that although reason begins locally, as it were, in similarities between two bodies, the rise in pleasurable affect that results from the understanding gained will drive an expansion of the range of ‘similarity’ to incorporate more and more of what would initially have been seen as insuperable differences. In the course of this, *all* parties will be affected and transformed. Thus we see the rationale for the claims of Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, in developing the implications of Spinoza’s thought, that affective ties are central to the social, that ‘Our identities are constituted through sympathetic and imaginative forming of wider wholes with others ...’, and indeed that these encounters are ‘better understood as collective *transformations* of previous identities rather than the exclusion or overcoming of difference.’⁸¹ Our feeling for, and imagining of, the other, can thus be strengthened by reason, in an evolving process. And Spinoza himself draws the conclusion that ‘one who is moved to aid others neither by reason nor by pity is rightly called inhuman.’⁸²

All this apparent harmony, in the logical unfolding of Spinoza’s system, does not, however, conceal a degree of turbulence underneath the placid surface. When Spinoza writes that ‘if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect’, we encounter an implicit complexity of contagious transmission between and across image/affect, self/other and mind/body boundaries that defies any simple idea of causal direction. Add to this that imaginings are always ‘present’, even when the object that originally impressed the image affection no longer is, and we can see how a whole series of imaginary and affectual identities, identifications and relations become possible, with conflict being, in practice, as likely as harmony. Following on from the excerpt quoted and discussed above, Spinoza himself points out that ‘it can happen that the joy with which someone imagines that he affects others is only imaginary’,⁸³ since actually he is being a burden – a rather rare example of Spinoza showing how the relative independence of the imagination, even as passive, can lead to problems, given the possibility of reactivating past traces, and the resultant possibility that the one-sidedness of image affections could be a source of later self-deception.

Indeed, we could go further. While we have learnt that the active pleasures of reason overcome the passive pleasures of imagination, it is not so clear that this provides sufficient initial motivation to get things moving, as it were: given that the pleasures of the imagination are presented as being those of passivity and of presence, life experienced in the fullness of the here and now, why move

away from this at all? Whatever the answer, it is clear that thought as reason is posited in Spinoza as an active power, with both the imagination and extension, by implication, positioned as passive, as in the status of the image affection, apparently needing the energy of affect to realize its potential;⁸⁴ and it is hard to miss a gender shading in all this.

We are, then, called on once more to return to the imagination and its relation to reason. Caroline Williams is right to claim that Spinoza presents the imagination as 'a form of corporeal awareness connecting the body's affects to understanding',⁸⁵ but we have seen grounds for thinking that this is by no means straightforward. What we find here is what Spinoza calls 'knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination',⁸⁶ and whatever its limitations, this is the foundation of the edifice, giving us 'a way of directly determining the resemblances between two bodies, however disparate they may be', in Deleuze's words,⁸⁷ thus enabling us to progress towards reason. But it may be worth considering the possibility that this sense of knowledge as a hierarchy could coexist with the idea of 'separate spheres' of knowledge, each with their conditions of plausible application. Unusually, Spinoza offers an example that could be said to point in this direction. When we look towards the sun, we imagine it to be quite close; and even when we come to learn its true distance, unimaginably further away, this does *not* affect its location as we imagine it.⁸⁸ And he adds, intriguingly, that this is also true for 'other imaginations by which the mind is deceived ... they are not contrary to the true, and do not disappear on its presence'.⁸⁹ Indeed, he makes the arresting claim that 'the imaginations of the mind, considered in themselves, contain no error'.⁹⁰ Imagination gives us the truth of the phenomenal realm, where experience is *our* experience, written on the body *and* imagined in relation to the other as relation (rather than 'in itself'); and hence this hints at the possibility of a theory of everyday popular consciousness, a phenomenology of experience that would run alongside official reason, and would, potentially, have its own integrity.

But all this would be very alarming for Deleuze. Rei Terada characterizes Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza's image affections as follows: 'Literally impressions in the body, affections imply that encounters with other bodies, and, moreover, between parts of one's own body, are in themselves semiotic. They infect all of experience with interpretation, and thus are portrayed as corrupting'.⁹¹ When Deleuze says of knowledge based on images that 'Such knowledge is not knowledge at all, it is at best recognition',⁹² he does indeed seem to go beyond Spinoza, who – as Deleuze himself recognizes elsewhere – explicitly counts this as a 'first' form of knowledge. So here, in this further

deviation from Spinoza, we can see how this can link up with the two earlier features of the analysis presented by Deleuze, Massumi and the radical theorists of affect: if affect can be presented as not only autonomous, and, ambitiously, as a manifestation of the primacy of process in our grasp of reality, then this can be reinforced by its emancipation from the corruptions of everyday discourse.

Overall, then, Spinoza could be said to prefigure themes of the era of sensibility, including the mutual – if problematical – imbrication of feeling and imagination,⁹³ and we can observe that his contribution is presented in a very one-sided way by contemporary affect theorists, keen as they are to downplay the relation between affect, imagination and culture. While Spinoza's own work manifests the two separable strands identified earlier in this chapter, we can now position contemporary affect theory as successor to *one* of these, the sensation strand, just as it loses touch with the central themes of the second strand, around the social dynamics of sympathetic engagement with the other. Indeed, present-day affect theorists frequently write in the very language of Hume's sensationalism. To take one example, Teresa Brennan's claim that 'In the last analysis, words and images are matters of vibration'⁹⁴ could have come straight out of Hume. And we might, finally, suggest that the purported emancipation of 'affect' from difficulties of cultural meaning and interpretation might leave it open to dialogue with contemporary developments in relevant areas of scientific understanding, notably neuroscience – just as it would be vulnerable to a naïve and uncritical acceptance of the fads and fashions emanating from those quarters, having deprived itself of any adequate means of understanding its own status and involvement in *cultural* processes that also incorporate those sciences themselves.

Let us end, though, in the year 1784, when a commission of investigation, in Paris, examined the claims of Franz Anton Mesmer to be able to channel 'animal magnetic fluids' via a rod, and his use of this to produce 'cures' for a variety of ailments. Our source here, Jessica Riskin, suggests that Mesmer applied the central credo of sentimental empiricism too literally: if feeling was an arbiter of truth, the manifestations of what people 'felt' must be reliable testimony. His patients duly writhed, groaned, and 'dramatized the process of feeling,' in turn 'dramatically' manifesting the effect/affectation dynamic of affect mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Mesmer claimed that all this was a manifestation of an ethereal 'fluid of sensibility,' pervading the universe, and to deny this was to 'undermine the authority of sensation.'⁹⁵ In countering this, the commission came up with what seemed, to many at the time, the equally outlandish claim that the imagination was a mental faculty, hence an *internal* source of influence

that could, in bizarre ways, have physical effects. What we find here, then, is a crisis in the whole underpinning of 'sensibility', symbolizing the ongoing collapse of its precarious coherence, with feeling and imagination threatening to fly apart, or recombine in new forms, and hints of unconscious processes and their 'hysterical' manifestations prefiguring developments to come ...