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Ugly Feelings (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

SIANNE NGAI *Ugly Feelings* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. x+422 pp. Melville stands—not unlike the democratic god in “Knights and Squires”—at both the center and circumference of Sianne Ngai’s stunning and original study of the negative affects she terms “ugly feelings,” providing the book’s point of departure, the focus of its afterword, as well as a significant portion of the eclectic archive in between. Neither a book about Melville nor a series of readings in Melville, *Ugly Feelings* is in many ways a sustained reading-through Melville, a book that has less to do with Melville’s body of writing, as such, than with what that writing does and—more to the point—with what one can do with it. From its opening pages, *Ugly Feelings* unfolds “in Melvillean fashion,” in Ngai’s phrase, seeking out “affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity,” which she first roots in the affective and political “equivocality” of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (Ngai 1). Naming both a “Bartlebyan affect” and a “Bartlebyan aesthetic,” Ngai then tracks what becomes a kind of Bartleby-effect through a wide-ranging archive of modern and postmodern fiction, poetry, film, television, and philosophy, all of which shares a fundamental preoccupation with the “suspended agency” and “emotional negativity” of the small subject: a

figure epitomized in both *Bartleby* by himself and in the Sub-Sub Librarian of *Moby-Dick*'s "Extracts." In taking up the cause of "the administered world's many Sub-Subs" (10), Ngai passes over the "rage-driven" *Moby-Dick* for what she describes as Melville's more emotionally ambiguous works—*Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man*, "*Bartleby*"—to identify in them the thematic fixations and formal features that unite the affective and aesthetic registers of Melville's work, while also developing out of these texts something more. Writing "in Melvillean fashion," Ngai ultimately finds in Melville, not only her study's chief aesthetic model, but also one of its principle theorists of affective ambiguity and—crucially—the unexpected political efficacy to be found in constructions of feelings that appear improper, fake, or simply ugly. Envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and disgust, along with two feelings she names herself—"animatedness" and "stuplidity"—make up what Ngai calls her "bestiary" of weak and petty affects (Ngai 7). Distinguished by their nastiness as well as their seeming impotence, she argues, these feelings c 2012 The Melville Society and Wiley Periodicals, Inc. 70 L

EVIATHANA JOURNAL OF MELVILLE STUDIES REVIEW nonetheless mediate in a significant way between the aesthetic and the political, providing something like an allegory for the shared passivity of the modern "administered" subject and of art in general in its "increasingly resigned and pessimistic relationship to political action" (3). Ngai bypasses better-known aesthetic emotions (sublimity, catharsis, sympathy) in pursuit of feelings which would seem far less productive, but which remain for her fundamentally social and material, bearing with them "a certain kind of historical truth" (5) as well as a particular political significance, however ambiguous and equivocal. For example, in Ngai's analysis, envy is a feeling structured by fundamental inequalities that ought to disclose real historical conditions, but more often than not, envy ends up discrediting its subject politically—particularly when that subject is female—by turning back on the envious charges of pettiness and lack (35). Irritation, by contrast, initially appears as a feeling of weak intentionality and basic impropriety (irritation is always either more or less feeling about a situation than it demands), but linked in Ngai's nuanced analysis to the physical experience of racialization that Frantz Fanon terms "epidermalization" (184), irritation emerges as a politically charged and strategically resistant affect in minority discourse (208). Ngai draws deeply on the work of the theorists of aesthetics and politics—principally Fredric Jameson, along with Theodore Adorno and Raymond Williams—taking seriously their claims that both affective and aesthetic forms carry with them political and historical content. But even as she relies heavily on Jameson...



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