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Introduction

EMOTIONAL CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENT

It is because the body is (to unequal degrees) exposed and endangered in the world, faced with the risk of emotion, lesion, suffering, sometimes death, and therefore obliged to take the world seriously (and nothing is more serious than emotion, which touches the depths of our organic being) that it is able to acquire dispositions that are themselves an openness to the world, that is, to the very structures of the social world of which they are the incorporated form.

—PIERRE BOURDIEU, *PASCALIAN MEDITATIONS*¹

WHO HAS NOT HAD the experience of feeling overpowered by anger, grief, or love? When emotions overwhelm us, our body seems to precede our mind (our palms sweat, our hearts race, we feel hot flashes, we gasp for air, our stomachs ache). We are, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu puts in this chapter's epigraph, "exposed and endangered." We may also do or say things we may come to regret and look at, retrospectively, in dismay. "What could I have found in her," asks Swann, the main character in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, musing on his dead passion for Odette.² He asks this question with the same puzzlement or embarrassment we may feel when reflecting on a passion for someone we now deem unworthy, on an anger whose burning intensity we no longer feel, which suggests that emotions are characterized by our deep involvement in the present and thus with a certain carelessness for the future. If emotions notoriously lack wisdom, it may be the wisdom of a calculative kind, able to anticipate regret or to calculate well-being. Emotions are thus quick reactions

to the world, and because of this, it has often been argued that emotions exceed the bounds of reason and make us err:³ They short-circuit slow thinking, circumvent our will, and disregard our prospective interest. In Philip Roth's *Indignation* (2008), the mother admonishes her son in a way we will have no trouble recognizing:

Don't you be [as bad as your father]. You be *greater* than your feelings. I don't demand this of you—*life* does. Otherwise, you'll be washed away by feelings. You'll be washed out to sea and never seen again. Feelings can be life's biggest problem. Feelings can play the most terrible tricks.⁴

Although we repeatedly hear such admonitions, we could equally say, with the same force, that emotions are the truth of our experience. In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), human beings distinguish androids from human beings through an "empathy test" because feeling is the mark of humanness.⁵ Thomas Mann put it even more dramatically: For the German writer, men and women not only are made fully human through their emotions but are "godlike, in that [they] feel."⁶ Emotions never err: Know what your emotions are, and you will be authentic and live a truly meaningful life for it. Emotional authenticity has further become the hallmark of mental health and of happiness, a message endlessly recycled by both high-brow and low-brow culture as well as by the mammoth industry of psychological advice.⁷

I skirt these two commonly received views of emotions—emotions-as-error and emotions-as-truth—and start from the premise that our emotions are *stylized moments* of being, moments in which we become engaged in a situation, sometimes urgently so, in a specific way. Screams, compassion, coolness, or tears are all ways to stylize our experience, give it a shape and contour, delineate the terrain of our interactions with others, sometimes reflexively and self-consciously, sometimes in a nonvoluntary way. Our emotions have much to do with who we are not only as persons with singular histories and unique psychic makeups but also and sometimes mostly as members of groups and cultures exercising a large set of invisible constraints on the inner life. Psychologists are typically interested in the former claim; sociologists, in the latter. Unbeknownst to us, emotions contain and enact the key ingredients of society. Norms, rules, social structures, and cultural guidelines constitute the invisible yet burning magma of emotions, unseen, yet at the heart of their energy.⁸ These are the assumptions that form the intellectual background of this book.

The Society in the Soul

Emotions have been a key object of philosophical investigation at least since the Stoa, a school of ethics founded in the ancient Agora of Athens by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC. Stoics viewed emotions as disturbances of the soul and aimed to develop a cultivated indifference.⁹ In enjoining us to extirpate from the soul whatever disturbed its tranquility, Stoics closed the lid on what exactly an emotion was. Christianity had a no less stringent emotional program in its intimation that we must control or erase such emotional sins as wrath, sloth, or lust and practice the love of God. We would have to wait for seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, considered by many to be the founder of modern secular philosophy, to lift that lid. In the background of a religious culture that legislated over emotional life through prohibitions and precepts, rewards and punishments, Spinoza offered the then-radical view that emotions were natural phenomena, worthy of rational investigation. As he famously claimed:

Such emotions as hatred, anger, envy, etc. considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and force of nature as other particular things. And therefore, they acknowledge certain causes through which they are understood, and have certain properties as worthy of study as the properties of any other thing the contemplation of which delights us. And so I shall treat of the nature and force of the emotions, and the power of the mind over them, by the same method by which I treated of God and the mind in previous parts, and I shall consider human actions and appetites exactly as if I were dealing with lines, planes and bodies.¹⁰

Lines, planes, and bodies: In these short lines, Spinoza disconnected emotions from sin and virtue and announced the intellectual program that would be implemented three centuries later and would make emotions the chief object of scientific study in the social and the natural sciences. Psychoanalysis, ego and positive psychology, cognitive psychology, anthropology and sociology, evolutionary biology and neuropsychology—all these disciplines approach emotions as lines, planes, and bodies, as things to know, predict, and control. But emotions are not only the object of a torrent of scientific theories. They are also the chief object of self-help and popular culture through TV, radio, the internet, movies, podcasts, therapists' rooms, and popular science, which instruct us about the whys and hows, dos and don'ts of our emotional life.

As a sociologist, I am interested not so much in healing psychic wounds but rather in understanding how society contributes to these wounds. Consider this example: In his memoirs, George Orwell recounts the following event, when he had joined the Republican troops during the Spanish Civil War:

One of the recruits who joined us while I was at the barracks was a wild-looking boy from the back streets of Barcelona. He was ragged and barefooted. He was also extremely dark (Arab blood, I dare say), and made gestures you do not usually see a European make; one in particular—the arm outstretched, the palm vertical—was a gesture characteristic of Indians. One day a bundle of cigars, which you could still buy dirt cheap at that time, was stolen out of my bunk. Rather foolishly I reported this to the officer, and one of the scallywags I have already mentioned promptly came forward and said quite untruly that twenty-five pesetas had been stolen from his bunk. For some reason the officer instantly decided that the brown-faced boy must be the thief. They were very hard on stealing in the militia, and in theory people could be shot for it. The wretched boy allowed himself to be led off to the guardroom to be searched. What most struck me was that he barely attempted to protest his innocence. In the fatalism of his attitude, you could see the desperate poverty in which he had been bred. The officer ordered him to take his clothes off. With a humility which was horrible to me he stripped himself naked, and his clothes were searched. Of course, neither the cigars nor the money was there; in fact, he had not stolen them. What was most painful of all was that he seemed no less ashamed after his innocence had been established.¹¹

This vignette unfolds as an interlocking chain of events and emotions, and these emotions in turn emerge betwixt and between individuals and social structures. We have no difficulty imagining the officer's accusations against the brown-skinned man as angry, and such anger, as Orwell's story makes clear, is motivated by racism and class prejudice. The speed with which the officer's accusations are proffered is due to his prejudice about the man's poverty and skin color.

More strikingly, consider the poor man's reaction: He is, Orwell tells us, resigned to his humiliation because, being poor, he has experienced humiliation many times before. Even when he is found to be innocent, he remains full of shame. Shame sticks to his being because it is an expression of his social condition and position, translated in repeated experiences of humiliation that accumulate in and through his body. These emotional experiences are converted into the image he has of himself and that he has internalized through

interactions with others, themselves embedded in a powerful system of domination. Through this system, he has learned to expect very little, hence his resignation. The officer's anger and the man's shame and submissiveness are social structures in action. Finally, this vignette further conveys another emotion: the narrator's compassion for the wrongly accused man. This compassion is undergirded by moral codes we have no difficulty identifying. They draw us into the story.

If emotions often overwhelm us with their imperious self-evidence and urgency, it is because they compress social structure, group identities, and moral codes. Emotions have a biological underpinning, but they are also moments in which such basic social dynamics as domination, competition, dependence, submissiveness, inequality, attachment, and norms of justice are processed by a singular person. In emotions, the biological, psychological, and sociological are tightly imbricated together. It may seem trivial to claim that our emotional experience contains collective categories and entities. Yet in the relationship we have to ourselves, we often obliterate the role society plays in it. We lust for bodies whose attractiveness has been defined by the conventions of the fashion industry but entertain the illusion of the uniqueness of our desire. We contemplate with envy the exotic vacation that has been lavishly exposed in magazines and billboards, yet attribute our choice of destination to our own adventurous curiosity. Modern culture so often invites us to feel ourselves exquisitely unique individuals that we easily forget our intimate experience is never entirely our own.¹² Like bats sending signals to find out which obstacle stands in front of them, we use our emotions to figure out, half consciously and half blindly, how much the world resists our pursuits or not, what in that world we desire, and which role we are supposed to play in it. Emotional responses are both the result of invisible chains of causes that preceded them and strategies to make sense of and control that experience. Emotions continue the work of society inside the self.

Because emotions are social, they have a shared cultural and social grammar that helps us speculate about others' feelings, make inferences about the emotions of real or fictional characters, and anticipate others' emotional reactions. We can do all that and much more because we share with other human beings knowledge of the rules and norms that underlie our and their emotions. Language plays a key role here. Emotion words—especially if they are salient in a culture—act like powerful magnets: They attract the floating particles of our interiority to them. Here is an example: A man slights you. What you will actually feel, how you will name your emotion, and what you will do with it depend

a great deal on whether you are a man or a woman and whether you are governed by an aristocratic ethic of honor, a Christian ethic of forgiveness, or an ethic of masculine rational self-control. You may feel a variety of conflicting emotions, but you will privilege one—anger, contempt, offendedness, fear—depending on your identity, social position, and some key moral belief. Sneering, shrugging, silence, seething, cowering, or a provocation to duel are possible and variable reactions to the same event. We label what we feel (or anticipate imaginatively what others feel toward us) by unconsciously referring back to the definitions of the situations we are engaged in, and their dos and don'ts. We attend to experiences by invoking the emotional tags attached to them, and culture provides those tags by helping us name, label, classify, categorize, and interpret the mumble jumble of the inner life. Our reactions and actions often follow such interpretations, though by no means systematically. Because culture sticks so much to emotions, we have to make an effort of erudite imagination to understand what fear of hell may have meant for medieval people, or what Homer meant when he wrote that Odysseus's tears are like those of a woman who "flings herself on the body of her husband, a warrior fallen in the battle defending his city."¹³ Otherwise, it would remain opaque to us why a nineteenth-century woman strove to be a cheerful "angel in the house"; or why a Bedouin man will feel personally and even intensely shamed by someone else's reference to his sister in sexual terms; or why the Ifaluk, a group in a Micronesian atoll, take great care in feeling and displaying the moral and emotional category of *metagu*, the fear and anxiety to offend rank and hierarchy.¹⁴

Feeling emotions, then, does not occur more inside the self than does speaking. Rather, emotions stand at the threshold between outer and inner self. Emotions are liminal (from the Latin word for "threshold": *limen*). Envy of my neighbor, fear of the stranger, and national pride are ways of creating, negotiating, and sustaining the threshold between my self and the world. In other words, (most) emotions are the dialogue we have, sotto voce, with the world. Through emotions, we internalize the outer world and externalize our inner world, and we do this continuously and seamlessly.¹⁵ Like the cutout shapes of a shadow theater, emotions are intelligible because there is a source of light behind them—social and cultural causes—and a translucent screen on which they can be projected: a concrete social situation with specific individuals who act in it.

These propositions run counter to a vast body of therapeutic theories and techniques and a highly lucrative industry of self-improvement. These have, by and large, blurred the enormous role played by social forces in our

emotional makeup. When the epistemology of psychology met the cultural market of capitalism, it was a successful marriage: Emotions viewed as dwelling inside the walled citadel of the self can be more easily purchased by individuals socialized to consume the means to know, manage, discipline, and transform their emotions. Cast as psychological entities with neatly bounded psyches, individuals can more easily become consumers of the emotional movements of and improvements to their self. The Horatio Algers of the present work from emotional rags to psychic riches. The overcoming of trauma, abuse, addiction, low self-esteem, or depression becomes a salvation program and feeds a hungry and greedy economic engine of self-improvement because clinical psychology in all its varieties—the commercialized and the scientific—has commodified the individual's emotional makeup in a way and to an extent that has no precedent;¹⁶ psychology has also obfuscated the ways in which modern life makes us implode within the echo chamber of our interiority. Psychology enjoins us to look inside the self for ways to fix wounds often inflicted by the powerful social forces of modernity.

But you may ask, Why should we believe sociology any more than we believe psychology? I could offer many arguments, but the most compelling one is that the former has been far less tied to powerful economic interests than has the latter. Psychology has produced a global army of experts to manage the workforce, increase productivity, and blur the role that gender inequality, competitiveness, and a failed meritocracy play in emotional distress. In the face of the massive tears to the social fabric entailed by capitalism, liberalism, globalization, and inequalities, psychology has further made the demand that we and only we ourselves take responsibility for our anxieties, depression, or rage.

In what ways has modernity—this vague and complex concept—unfolded in our emotional life? This is the overarching question of my book. More specifically, I want to understand a distinct malaise at the beginning of the twenty-first century through the lens of twelve emotions, which both enact and illustrate the conundrum of our times. Interestingly, Freud explored a similar proposition at the beginning of the twentieth century, when he strove to shed light on the malaise of his epoch through the emotion of guilt.¹⁷ But while Freud explained Europe's increasingly violent climate by projecting on society psychic mechanisms (of repression most notably), I do the opposite and read society in emotions.¹⁸ Of course, the twelve emotions on which I concentrate here have long existed in Western European culture, in the sense that we have used their names for a long time. But in the key institutions of modernity, they have taken on a new meaning. Consumer culture reshaped

hope, disappointment, envy, and resentment. Democracy and its attendant ideologies of equality, fairness, and security reorganized envy, anger, and fear, while nationalism did the same for the feelings of homelessness and nostalgia. And perhaps most obviously, the contestation of patriarchy and heterosexism had a resounding impact on shame, pride, jealousy, and love. The notion of modernity may seem too capacious and therefore make this project distressingly broad. More than as a period, modernity can be viewed as a historical dynamic that has unfolded since the Renaissance, with the Enlightenment marking its intellectual culmination. Modernity thus stands at the intersection of a number of processes: a self-conscious break with tradition and religion together with a secularization of values; the demise of formal barriers between hierarchically ordered groups and the spread of egalitarian views of the person, with the result that the self became entrusted with the task of reflexively navigating social relations; the crushing domination of competitive markets to organize work and life aspirations; the rise of a technology-mediated culture producing endless flows of images of the good life; the circulation of large population flows throughout the globe from one nation-state to another; the transformation of individuals into singularities, entities that cultivate their sense of uniqueness; and finally the simultaneous intensification both of aspiration to social mobility and of class inequality. Depending on the emotion discussed, I refer to different temporal and analytical “slices” of modernity. Envy compels me to refer to the nineteenth-century consumer culture, while anger brings me to the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Yet a large focus is located in the period that emerged from the 1980s onward, a period in which the tension and struggle between democratic and economic forces that had characterized the formation of economic and political modernity collapsed under the weight of economic forces. In the century during which individual rights steadily expanded, economic forces were somewhat held in check by political counterforces. But with deregulation of markets, financialization of the economy, and expansion of monopolistic capitalism, processes of commodification penetrated most social relations, and the market became even more disembedded from society. Public services became profitable enterprises and trampled the notion of public interest. Unions weakened or disappeared, and work became more precarious. Inequality increased to unseen proportions, with single individuals amassing fortunes greater than the GDP of many countries. Knowledge and information became fundamental to the economy, leaving the noneducated outside or far more marginal than they had been during the formation and consolidation of industrial capitalism.

Technology was interwoven in the fabric of daily life and of consciousness itself. Under the impact of these various social and political forces, a number of emotions became salient both in public life and in individual consciousness. One sign of such malaise may be found in the fact that social democracy, which was so hard fought for during the last two hundred years, is in decline and even put into question by authoritarian populist leaders and disgruntled voters in many countries around the world. These political movements have shattered such key practices of deliberative democracies as accountability, the rule of law, and factuality. Another sign of discomfort is the significant increase in mental health problems among young adults during the last decade. The American Psychological Association reveals that “individuals reporting symptoms consistent with major depression in the last 12 months increased 52 percent in adolescents from 2005 to 2017 (from 8.7 percent to 13.2 percent) and 63 percent in young adults age 18 to 25 from 2009 to 2017 (from 8.1 percent to 13.2 percent).” In addition, a stunning 71 percent increase is observed in young adults who say they have experienced “serious psychological distress in the previous 30 days” between 2008 and 2017 (from 7.7 percent to 13.1 percent).¹⁹ High school students increasingly report “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.” In 2009, these feelings were experienced by 26 percent of high school students; in 2021, this number rose to 44 percent.²⁰ The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers another stunning statistic: From 2000 to 2021, there was a 36 percent increase in the suicide rate.²¹ I do not attempt to make a direct link between the two phenomena, the political and the mental. I only suggest they both bear the trace of a malaise, a term I prefer to those often invoked in public discourse: crisis, decline, or civilizational collapse. The crisis of democracy and the increase in mental distress alert us that something in the emotional and social life of late modernity needs to be addressed and understood.

I call such modernity “explosive,” and not simply “uncomfortable” or “repressive,” because many of the key institutional features of modernity conflict with each other and create deep tensions and contradictions within the subject. Even if, as already mentioned, none of the emotions discussed is in itself modern, never before have emotions been so intensely solicited by such institutions as the consumer market, democratic citizenship, private life, economic inequality, and economic domination. Never before in history have economic, cultural, and political institutions so systematically solicited emotions; for example, however ancient the emotion of envy may be, never before has it been as structurally embedded in consumer culture. The same goes with anger,

which circulates through highly developed party politics, partisan news, ideological platforms, and social-media bubbles. Some emotions have in fact become “solidified” in the key institutions of modernity.

Hope and hopefulness are the emotional ground structuring individual aspiration and public institutions aiming to improve the fate of citizens. As the next chapter establishes, hope is the constitutive category of the modern individual. It is intermixed with disappointment, envy, anger, resentment, fear, and nostalgia, and this combination constitutes the peculiar texture of late-modern emotional discontent. Democratization and the ideal of equality are bound to make class inequality caused by capitalist production intolerable. A culture of aspiration and achievement conflicts with the ever-more-limited access to lucrative or prestigious professions. The political doctrine of liberalism, which aims to guarantee the security of citizens, in fact multiplies the number of fears citizens have to cope with. A moral discourse that attributes equal dignity to all human beings makes shame and shaming more likely, precisely because the demands of dignity increase. A practice of intimacy supposed to yield emotional closeness actually creates complexity, making intimate relations unpredictable and difficult. These and other tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes form the conceptual plot of this book.

Modernity has also become explosive for a second reason. Under the enormous influence both of commercialized fiction and of psychological culture, emotions now play a key role in self-definitions and in the emergence and maintenance of social relations that increasingly rely on the conscious self-scrutiny and monitoring of emotions. This emotional self-knowledge is no longer accompanied by the formation of character, an orientation to moral values, virtue, and the good. Individuals are principally attuned to their private goals, pleasure, and feelings. When relationships and identities are freely entered and exited at will, when work and studies are the outcome of an individual’s choices and aspirations, when marriage and intimacy are the result of acts of choice, then the success or failure of the individual in these realms is attributed to her psychological makeup—that is, to emotional “pathologies,” “health,” or “emotional intelligence.” For all these reasons, individuals operate a reflexive retreat to their own self, interrogate their emotions and attempt to shape them according to their goals and life plan. Emotions become the reality through which individuals apprehend themselves and a great deal of their social world, turning emotions into the ground and object of social relations, imbuing them with an objective reality. As a result, reality itself becomes intensely emotional, a series of emotional transactions that can be explosive,

precisely because the content of emotional life has become the chief ground of reality and the very object of transactions. Emotions have become individuals' reality and its battleground, what people struggle to shape and control and what they fight about with others.

My strategy is not historical. I do not compare the present to the past, at least not systematically and rigorously. Nor do I attempt to flag modernity as a more deleterious period of history than its predecessors. The contrary would be true. Modernity has been a mixture of increased modes of domination of human beings and destruction of nature as well as genuine moral progress and must be considered within this tension. Finally, while most of the emotions discussed in this book have been evoked at least since biblical times, what is new is their object (e.g., envy of groups who have benefited from affirmative action), their intensity and contagiousness (e.g., anger circulated in social media), their unique combination (e.g., persistent hope and disappointment), their saliency in the awareness of modern people (e.g., carrying a permanent sense of aggrieved victimhood), their institutionalization (consumer culture, nationalism, private life, and democracy all constitute ways of channeling and constructing emotions), and finally the very assumption that we are entitled to an emotionally pain-free life (making the so-called negative emotions less tolerable). All of these elements combined constitute the "modernity" of the emotions discussed here.

This book, then, offers a grand thesis—modernity should be read through the prism of emotions, and these emotions sometimes become explosive—but is written as a series of tableaux loosely connected to each other, each sketching rather than painting the transformations of the emotional self in the backdrop of the large institutional changes of modernity. These sketches blur the boundaries of disciplinary genres and offer musings about the current moment through the lens of the sociology of emotions.²² I thus ask my broad thesis to be interpreted through a series of self-contained essays rather than to be taken as a definitive account based on a rigorous empirical analysis. For that reason, I have chosen to organize my discussion around literary texts, as ways to probe and raise questions.

Literature as a Place to Learn Emotions

If emotions are stylized experiences located at the seamline between the collective and the personal, some areas of culture are more likely than others to both express and shape the intersection of the individual and the social.

Novels, poems, plays, or Netflix series are such cultural sites. The great American sociologist Howard Becker called on his discipline not to think it had the monopoly to understand society and enjoined his peers to use works of fiction in their analyses.²³ As a modern literary form, the novel depicts the new fluidity of the individual and of social relationships, the tension between emotional projects and socioeconomic constraints, and the entanglement of individuals' psychology with social structures. Being itself a reflection of and a reflection on society, novels are good to think with and to feel with. In the preface of *Delphine* (1802) nineteenth-century French writer Germaine de Staël observed that literature is unique in its ability to provide access to inner feelings.²⁴ Novels are privileged sites to engage in discussions of emotions because the characters in them and the plots they live through become intelligible through an emotional grammar. They show and mimic individual interiority (except when they consciously try to evade psychological language, as in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* [1942]); they presuppose that we can know and understand characters through their psychology—that is, through their motivations, goals, and emotions.²⁵ Isaiah Berlin, the Oxford don, put it aptly:

When I was young, I read *War and Peace* by Tolstoy, much too early. The real impact on me of this great novel came only later, together with that of other Russian writers, both novelists and social thinkers, of the mid-nineteenth century. These writers did much to shape my outlook. It seemed to me, and still does, that the purpose of these writers was not principally to give realistic accounts of the lives and relationships to one another of individuals or social groups or classes, not psychological or social analysis for its own sake—although, of course, the best of them achieved precisely this, incomparably. Their approach seemed to me essentially moral: they were concerned most deeply with what was responsible for injustice, oppression, falsity in human relations, imprisonment whether by stone walls or conformism—unprotesting submission to man-made yokes—moral blindness, egoism, cruelty, humiliation, servility, poverty, helplessness, bitter indignation, despair on the part of so many. In short, they were concerned with the nature of these experiences and their roots in the human condition: the condition of Russia in the first place, but, by implication, of all mankind.²⁶

Isaiah Berlin describes the experience of many Eastern and Western Europeans. For them, knowledge of the world started as a knowledge of the plots and characters of novels. This is because this genre intricately embeds

the character's psychology in a social world that shapes action and is transformed by it. Such fictional works operate as a window on the characters' emotions, which in turn contain and enact moral codes and social structures. Only through these codes is characters' psychology plausible. Cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley, a specialist in the processing of fiction, put it very accurately: "It's generally accepted that the dreams of fiction are about the emotions. One could almost say they are all about the emotions."²⁷ The great French literary theorist Roland Barthes surprisingly concurs. In a 1978 lecture given at the Collège de France, he called for a "pathetic theory of the novel," a theory in search of the novel's emotional effects, and for focusing the literary approach toward "moments of truth," where the novel produced in the reader an intense emotional recognition of her own experience. "The novel, as I read or desire it, is precisely that form which, by delegating the discourse of affect to characters, permits saying that affect openly. [. . .] Its power is the truth of affects, not of ideas."²⁸ Jon Elster, an analytic philosopher who could not be further from Barthes, sounds strangely similar to him, albeit with less flourish: "I also believe that with respect to an important subset of the emotions we can learn more from moralists, novelists, and playwrights than from the cumulative findings of scientific psychology."²⁹ Countless scholars and readers concur: literature is a treasure trove exposing emotions from which readers learn about the emotions, their own and others'. This proposition remains solidly true with the prevalence of visual media—cinema and TV—which are predominantly about plots and characters, intentions and motivations. We learn about emotions through stories, and many or most emotions are lived as embedded in stories.³⁰ For the reader, novels (and other narrative forms such as Netflix series) provide a kind of mind reading, which demands a fundamental cognitive skill infused with emotional capacities.³¹ It helps to imagine what others may feel and to better understand what motivates them. We can go further and view novels as the place for the mind to keep track of who feels what, when, and why.³² The novel, yes, that endless flow of stories in whichever medium it is presented, has provided a tremendous source for the cognitive learning of other people's minds by making emotions a set of visual, linguistic, and gestural codes.

In what follows, I will discuss emotions by using and referring to a corpus of literary texts chosen somewhat arbitrarily. I am far from being the first to use literature as a way to discuss emotions. Martha Nussbaum was a remarkable pioneer in the genre.³³ Yet, in contradistinction to her approach, I am not interested in discussing the normative and moral character of

emotion—which emotions are or aren’t unsuitable to a democracy, for example. Literature helps me, if not to define, then at least to delineate the sociological dilemmas contained in an emotion as it has evolved in contemporary culture. I use, for the most part, well-known literary texts because these are largely present in our culture. They are therefore an enduring source of collective self-understanding and thus constitute a departure point to engage a sociological reflection on a given emotion. Novels (especially of the realist variety) contain an “ethical reality” in the sense that they deal with individual and collective habits, with characters’ behavior, attitudes, and passions.³⁴ Characters’ emotions derive from a set of problems and situations that reflect the ethical habits of a society, either because they reflect or because they disrupt these habits.³⁵ Inasmuch as emotions and ethical views are always mutually implied in each other, the notion of moral mimesis can be extended to emotional life. The *Iliad* (eighth century BC), for example, starts with the emotion of anger, and its plot is the unfolding of such anger, which itself reflects moral codes of male honor.³⁶ Such moral mimesis is present whenever a writer puts in evidence an ethical attitude—the righteous anger of Michael Kohlhaas, the muted sadness of Tess of the d’Urbervilles, or the snobbism of a Swann.³⁷ It is also present in such genres as the tragedy or the epic and is even more significant in the novel, the genre of predilection of the moralist.³⁸ The novel is particularly suited to the sociology of emotions because as Marcel Proust put it: “[T]he writer, in order to achieve volume and substance, in order to attain to generality and, so far as literature can, to reality, needs to have seen many churches in order to paint one church and for the portrayal of a single sentiment requires many individuals.”³⁹ Like writers of fiction, sociologists are attentive to the general dimension of individual experience.

This does not mean that fictional literature is an open window on reality. It may contain or discuss the social world, but it is also an institution of language and imagination. Through literature, we connect to the main myths and imaginary dimension of culture—what a culture dreams about, what it is anxious about, what it anticipates.⁴⁰ Far from being antithetical, the realistic and imaginary dimensions of fictional texts are continuous with each other because society itself is maintained by radical imagination⁴¹—more precisely, social institutions whose core is in fact an imaginary one. A crusade, an airspace launch, or a family are all sustained by an imaginary core, how they are imagined by their participants. Literature imagines the social world, and emotions participate in this act of imagination. Emotions take us to the imaginary core of institutions, which to a large extent forms what we call social reality.

The last reason that my approach differs from a philosophical reading of literature has already been mentioned: it is not normative. Literature is a uniquely useful way to organize a sociological discussion of emotion because when examined sociologically, and not morally, emotions turn out to be profoundly ambivalent. They can proceed from a multiplicity of moral motives and have contradictory effects on society. Most emotions are at once conducive to and corrosive of social bonds, positive and negative, moral and immoral. Literature shows that the social and moral life of emotions do not overlap.

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