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Intellectual History and the Affective Turn:  
Thoughts on *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (2007)

Seth Reno's thoughtful response to Adam Potkay's *The Story of Joy* includes a gloss on the book's relationship to recent "affective turn" in the humanities. He points out that while Potkay "gestures toward" the psychological approach of Silvan Tomkins, which imagines affect as a felt, "corporeal" experience "rooted in biology," he "tends toward a less corporeal and more intellectual...vision of joy" commensurate with the Aquinian and Spinozan traditions that he discusses centrally in the book (1). This comment proved really helpful to me as I tried to make sense of Potkay's project as a whole. As Seth suggests, one way to assess a scholar's approach to the description of a passion is to ask how he defines it—whether he thinks the experience of that passion happens in the body or the mind or some combination of the two. And Potkay, in his definitional introduction, clearly sees joy, at least, (if not all the passions,) as an aspect of human experience that begins in biology and may be felt in the body but is ultimately directed by the mind. He praises as "the best concise definition [of joy that] I've found" John Locke's 1689 definition, which calls joy "a delight of the Mind, from the consideration of the present or assured approaching possession of a Good" (4). Moreover, while Potkay elaborates upon this and other definitions, he returns repeatedly to the idea that the mind is central to human experiences of joy. He seems to me to be concerned with two different aspects of the mind's involvement. First, he assumes that our experience of joy, however innate, natural, or physiologically mechanical in its origins, is mediated by the mind, consciously or unconsciously, in the moment when we feel joy. Secondly, he suggests that as we grow and mature, our capacity to feel joy is continually nurtured and refined by the intellect, by memory, by what we read, by how we worship (if we worship at all), by our social experiences, and by the value judgments that these faculties and experiences help us to make. Potkay observes that although joy "may" be "accompany[ied]" by "[p]articulate physiological reactions" such as weeping (5), and although it may be palpable even to infants and dogs (e.g., 8), "the range of arousal involved in a joy depends, in part, on what a language community agrees to call a joy" (5).

What are the stakes associated with defining "joy" this way? In my understanding, Potkay's second definitional claim—the idea that the "range of arousal involved in a joy" is culturally contingent—paves the way for a historicist treatment of affect and emotion carefully distinct from the treatment that one expects to find in, say, a Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalytical approach. Whereas these other approaches (at least as they are often applied in literary criticism) presume universal modes of human feeling and thinking, Potkay's study argues that individual experiences of a given passion do not necessarily remain constant through history, despite some constancy in the biological wiring of our capacity to feel that passion. Indeed, individual experiences of a passion may not even remain constant within a single "language community" at a discrete moment in time. Considered as an abstraction, the definitional thesis registered in Potkay's title comes as close to he gets to making a

universalizing claim about the nature of joy: that is, one's understanding of when to feel joy, and of what joy should feel like, is shaped by stories about love, loss, and futurity, especially stories shared by others in one's own contemporary language community. To make this case, Potkay compiles a specific, carefully local intellectual history—the “story of joy” in a second sense.

This intellectual history, which largely pertains to “joy” in the West, reveals important conceptual shifts over time from the Bible to late Romanticism and beyond, and it highlights distinctive individual postures toward joy within the language communities comprised in each of the historical episodes that Potkay singles out for discussion. Taken together, these episodes show that although joyful feeling is always structured by stories about the constitution and proximity of “the Good,” there is no single, universal affective condition or narrative of the subject's experience that characterizes all joyful episodes. In medieval Europe, joy was, conditioned by both religious and (less centrally) sexual longing; during the Enlightenment, joy underwent a gradual secularization (albeit not without some opposition); this secularization, in turn, influenced then-emergent religious conceptions of joy (like Mormonism) and became curiously entwined with nineteenth-century aesthetic ideals before becoming radically estranged from its ethical origins during the Holocaust, a slide into “tragic joy” from which the post-secular age has struggled to recover. Definitions of joy articulated at the end of this history do not replicate definitions of joy articulated at the beginning: “what a language community agrees to call a joy” has changed. And, even within a given chapter of this history—Potkay's analysis of Coleridge and Wordsworth, for instance, who were friends with common linguistic experiences—the “range of arousal involved in a joy” may differ among individuals (and may even change within a single author's works). Whereas Wordsworth “[e]xtend[ed] the franchise of joy” to the apprehension of God in Nature, “bring[ing] us word ‘Of joy in widest communal[i]ty spread’” (132, 136), Coleridge “retained something of joy's Christian context” (150).

For me, one of the most profound implications of Potkay's historicist mode is the possibility that the stories that we tell ourselves about joy not only influence what affective entities we agree to call a “joy”; they may actually shape our capacity to experience joy. By the time I arrived at the final chapter, I was convinced that the Western world in the modern age, while surely not joyless, has been generally characterized by a diminished capacity to indulge the forms of religious joy described by Potkay at the start of the book. While reading the final chapter, Cornell West's comment about joy struck me as an especially concise illustration of the “post-ness” of our own post-religious, post-secular moment, especially within academic circles. Unlike some others whom Potkay quotes in this chapter, West wants to make room for full experiences of joy. But West's language is already so steeped in neo-Marxist concepts of commodification and class conflict—concepts in many respects antithetical to the embrace of religiosity as a constructive aspect of human social experience—that he shows himself struggling to define “joy” in positive terms. He can only begin to work toward a definition by contrasting joy with more “inward” forms of pleasure:

Pleasure, under commodified conditions, tends to be inward. You take it with you, and it's a highly individuated unit. . . . But joy tries to cut across that. Joy tries to get at those non-market values – love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice – values that provide the possibility of bringing people together. (222)

West's hesitations about the transcendent properties of joy are palpable. Joy “*tries* to cut across that [inward focus and individuation]”; joy “*tries* to get at those non-market values,” as if to imply that we must now work not only to remember what joy can be and do, but also to develop

a vision of a polity in which joyfulness seems valuable. Potkay points out that West's comment is controlled by a carefully secular sense of community that guards against notions of joy "as a consolidating term of politics": "Solidarity is here presented, modestly, as the possible result of the moral choices of individuals; it is not...given metaphysical priority in an abstract 'multitude' that need only recognize itself in the fullness of time, through the conquest or conversion of those who now wield power" (222). The implication, I assume, is that for West, (and presumably for Potkay as well,) it is not ethically feasible in our modern moment to seek to revive the ideas about community undergirding some of the fullest expressions of joy in earlier eras.

What remains possible, however, is empathetic investigation into cultures in which full-throated joy was possible—an emotive capacity and a form of research that will surely help to expand our capacity to conceive joy in its full "range of arousal," even if modern stories about joy are less strongly conditioned by stories about godly community in the afterlife than their Western predecessors were. I especially admired this aspect of the book: Potkay's effort to consider religion, especially Christianity, as a major player—and not necessarily a negative force—in the intellectual history that he traces. Potkay's learning about theological and Biblical matters is impressive. He seems to me to know more about Christian and medieval intellectual history than most eighteenth-centuryists do. And, for me, it was only because he sketched this history with such painstaking fullness and evaluative neutrality that the later interventions of Enlightenment philosophers like Shaftesbury could be crisply understood as secularized reimaginings of "the Good" that, in some ways, narrowed and diminished the communitarian claims previously associated with joy. It is easy to cast the Enlightenment as rightfully triumphant over Christian religiosity and all its trappings. Potkay, however, frames his study by asking, "What have we lost?" (1)—an attitude duly and powerfully respectful of the range of human emotional experiences that religiosity can make possible. This mindfulness, as he himself presents it, is in an enlightened, post-secular age an ethical basis for joy. In his words, "As long as we judge loss, limits, and extinction to be evils, we will never, at least in the stories we tell ourselves, be without joy" (236).