"Emotions and their languages: histories/territories"

Esmotion: f. An emotion, commotion, sudden, or turbulent stirring; an agitation of the spirit, violent motion of the thoughts, vehement inclination of the mind.

This translation of the French term *esmotion*, provided by Randall Cotgrave in his 1611 *Dictionary of the French and English Tongues*, serves as an excellent introduction to our research into emotions in Early Modern Britain. Firstly, it is a reminder of the proximity between the French term and the English ("Esmotion…an emotion"), at that time, whereas in contemporary usage the two have become far more distant, and the current meaning of emotion or *esmotion* has changed quite significantly.\[1\] For English lexicographers of the period, such as Thomas Blount, Edward Phillips, Elisha Coles or John Kersey,\[2\] the term "emotion" primarily referred to a movement, a displacement, a "transport",\[3\] with its definition raising questions of territory, circulation and migration, as well as applying to geographic domains (population movement) and scientific ones (shifting centres of gravity, meteorological phenomena, etc.).\[4\] As for the word "commotion", it refers to the tumult of a seditious crowd, as noted by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as early as 1579. The *OED* also reveals that the other meanings given by Cotgrave in his translation – i.e. "sudden or turbulent stirring" or "an agitation of the spirit" – only entered the English language in 1692 and 1660 respectively, several decades after he mentioned them in relation to the French term *esmotion*.\[5\] The terms "turbulent", "stirring", "violent" and "vehement" show that the definition reflects a value system in which emphasis is placed upon the disordered nature of emotions, perceived as disruptions of judgement.

This then, was Randall Cotgrave's translation of *esmotion* into his own language: movement, either individual or collective, of the body or the soul; sudden, violent and dangerous, or at least threatening and excessive, even when it is limited in space and time. With this translation, he foresaw the meanings which were gradually to evolve over the years leading up to the late 17th century, and which remained relatively stable thereafter until the 19th century, never really becoming entirely dissociated from the original idea of movement and displacement, of a catalyst to action.

These definitions are interesting because they focus attention on certain interconnected
lexical and conceptual problems. How can we justifiably study early modern "emotions" (and, indeed, which ones are we to study?) without definitions and vocabulary which are both stable and morally neutral, and which correspond to contemporary categories? What exactly is Cotgrave referring to? What is this movement, which even Cotgrave’s own language can only define by means of a circumlocution, and which he describes as sudden and turbulent? What is "agitation of the spirit"? What is an "inclination"? How are we to understand the distinction between "spirit", "thoughts" and "mind"? Is not Cotgrave, in fact, referring to passion, rather than emotion?

Studying emotions may involve questioning formal categories, since one key issue is that of distinguishing between emotions, humours, temperaments, passions, affects, vices or virtues and, finally, sentiments, and of reflecting upon the meanings of these various terms. Why and to what extent does "emotion" coexist, after 1660, alongside "passion", "affection", "perturbation", "appetite" and, later, alongside "sentiment"?

For a long time, as a consequence of these semantic shifts and overlapping, this particular field of study was seldom, and reluctantly, addressed, because of the dangers of anachronism, presentism and subjectivity it seemed to comprise. Nonetheless, after a long process whereby emotions have been progressively dissociated from the history of sensibilities and of mentalities, they have now become historical objects in their own right. The very extensive bibliography and recent international research programmes on the question bear witness to this shift.[6] New interest in the emotions has merely intensified the need for appropriate methodological foundations in the absence, paradoxical though it may seem, of consensual definitions.[7]

In light of the contributions made by neurosciences since the 1950s and 1960s, it is difficult today to subscribe fully to the historiographic grand narrative which systematically opposed reason and emotions according to a progressist vision of history, emphasising a process of rationalisation and excising any or all cognitive dimensions.[8] Scientific, anthropological, philosophical or historical approaches may appear significantly different and even contradictory, but this area of study is nonetheless now determinedly pluridisciplinary and a gradual synthesis of various approaches can be observed. Alongside scientific trends which had set out to highlight the relationship linking emotions to nature and the body, cognitive psychology and cultural constructivism have now acknowledged the rational and social dimensions of the emotions.[9] Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy sum up the decades which saw this paradigm shift take place as follows:

[C]ette émotion nouvelle est en net décalage avec celle du « mythe des passions ». Aujourd’hui l’opposition raison-émotion n’est plus revendiquée par personne dans les disciplines nouvelles de l’émotion. À cause de la fluidité de la notion, il existe toujours des auteurs qui sont prêts à distinguer deux catégories d’émotions : la première serait primitive, organique et universelle et la seconde, cognitive et culturelle. Néanmoins, les penseurs et scientifiques contemporains des bords les plus variés admettent la relation conjointe des émotions, et plus généralement de l’affectivité, avec les registres corporels et cognitifs, même s’il demeure des différences dans la manière dont ils « dosent » ou modélisent ces relations. Par conséquent, le débat entre culturalistes et naturalistes, ou entre les deux réductionnismes, semble à peu près clos…[10]

This seminar does not aim to offer an all-inclusive reflection of the trends and research that have, over the last sixty years, strived to define and structure the study of emotions, though these will inevitably be mentioned over the course of the sessions in order to help guide our efforts to determine our theoretical and conceptual approaches. For instance, the
history of sensibility laid out by Lucien Febvre within the context of fascism in 1941 bears little relation to the theory of emotionology elaborated by Peter and Carol Stearns in the 1980s, which is interested in the social norm but which, they state, only applies to the contemporary period in the context of mass culture. However, what we shall attempt to do is to structure our collective analysis around five main lines of enquiry which will be followed in turn over the duration of the sessions and which we feel reflect the specific nature of our approach and of Britain in the 17th and 18th century: a) the opportunities provided by a cross-disciplinary approach, b) the notion of cultural or textual territory or space, and the interpretive communities resulting from those concepts c) emotions in scholarley and popular culture d) the textual and extratextual language of emotions (voice, gesture, corporal representation).

Our starting point will be a series of hypothesis on the validity of interdisciplinary work, to define not the nature of an emotion, but rather its languages. This seminar is original because of its position at the intersection of historical, philosophical and artistic fields of study, where historians of religion work alongside musicologists and specialists of the novel. The sessions deliberately do not focus on one specific emotion, to allow for exchanges on questions relating to genre, sources, literary corpus and the choice of conceptual tools. This strategy is not entirely devoid of danger, however, as it may appear that no limits are set to the subject under study and that no distinction has been made between the emotions and other affective states or conditions. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the seminar will provide a locus for reflexion, testing the boundaries of the concept of emotions in the 17th and 18th centuries and assessing the scope of its application. There is no consensus amongst researchers either as to the list of basic pancultural emotions, or as regards the rules governing the establishment of such a list, although some models do include joy, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust. If we bear in mind the ideas of evaluation, assessment and adaptation, physical reactions and the transitory nature of emotions, we can analyse intense and sudden phenomena, accompanied by physical symptoms (jealousy, envy, shame, embarrassment, guilt, despair, etc.) while also considering more stable conditions, more akin to temperament (pride, humility, courage, audacity, curiosity, timidity, melancholy, etc.), feelings and sentiments (love, hatred, compassion, indifference, pity, etc.) or, conversely, sensations. This should allow us to explore the negative or positive values ascribed to emotions in different types of discourse such as, for example, Christian – or more specifically Puritan – discourse encouraging the believer to feel guilt, shame, fear or even despair, feelings that are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, in the conversion process.

We will then also consider the specific nature of the territory formed by Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries, bearing in mind cultural practices as well as mental, intellectual and religious constructs. Certain influences are already evident, such as that of movements arising from the Henrician reformation, advocating a discourse of the middle way, in opposition to the rhetoric of excess associated with the "world turned upside down" of the civil wars, or that of the trauma caused by the execution of Charles I and the subsequent myth of Stuart martyrdom. Baconian empiricism, Burke’s concept of the sublime and the figures of the Scottish Enlightenment (Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Thomas Reid) all contributed to the moral philosophy of what is known as the long eighteenth century.

Over these centuries of revolution and reformation, political, religious and epistemological divides, often brutal in character, gave rise to new emotional communities, conceptualised by Barbara Rosenwein. We will try to establish the nature of these communities, their territories and control strategies. The history of emotions is also linked to that of the way in which specific communities within a society express, encourage or censor emotions by means of normative discourses and, conversely, to a history of strategies for bypassing or surpassing norms. Beyond the purely private sphere, these communities were
literary and artistic (academies or salons), philosophical and scientific (the Royal Society), religious (the Protestant and Catholic churches and dissenting movements), economic (corporations), political (Whigs, Tories, Jacobites), social (the middle classes), geographical (relating to "Britishness" following the 1707 and 1801 Acts of Union) or legal.

Although it may appear that over previous periods the history of emotions was dominated by scholarly discourse, from the mid-17th century new phenomena studied by representatives of the British "revisionist" trend have made it possible to reconsider the relationship between elite and popular cultures. These include the opening of the public sphere to include authors and commentators from less privileged social groups, the increasing visibility of women in public and literary circles and the politicisation of the population. This growing awareness gave rise to mass movements which, amongst other things, led to a redefining of the monarchy and of the electoral system and which gave expression to the emotions of the crowd, to use the term employed by Tim Harris.[18] Indeed, the term "emotion", as we have seen, referred to a form of political agitation. The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed a major redefinition of private and public territories.

Then we will explore the various "languages" of emotions. The language of emotions is primarily verbal and is mediatised by texts. A study of the emotional lexicon in a range of sources should allow us to assess the importance of certain semantic shifts in the period under study, as is the case for the term "fear" (with its recurring compound forms "slavish fear" and "godly fear"), which coexists alongside "dread", "awe", "fright" and even "reverence", with different meanings.[19] The expression of emotions is itself a discursive phenomenon and analysis of the strategies of narrating emotions in historical documents, ego-documents (autobiographies, personal diaries, correspondence, conversion accounts, meditations and prayers) as well as in fictional texts, is a key aspect of our work.[20] Moreover, some of these texts could also arouse emotions in that they are also performative in nature, as is the case of sermons, tales or plays, for instance. The "performativity" of emotions is also observable in religious rites, for which researchers have access to a quantity of dogmatic and normative documents, artistic and literary representations and other accounts relating to such practices.

Emotions become perceptible when they are embodied and incarnated; we will therefore also pay careful attention to body language. This can consist of bodily manifestations encompassing varying degrees of violence, from blushing to mutilation, and including tears, trembling, gestures betraying desire or anger, facial expressions, inflexions of the voice or, conversely, impassivity, control and silence. The exteriorisation (or the absence thereof) of emotions will be a key aspect of our reflexion.[21]

This seminar thus hopes, over a two-year period, to contribute to a study of the emotions focussing on a specific period and territory, analysing the expression and reception of emotions and investigating their contexts, discourse, history, practices and performativity.

Notes

[1] Between the Renaissance and the French Classical age, the term *esmotion* was defined as "un trouble moral ou suscité par l’amour, un mouvement, une séditation, un malaise physique," Dictionnaire historique de la langue française, dir. Alain Rey (1992; Paris: Le Robert, 2006).


[5] "Stirring" is, however, mentioned by Blount (1656), Phillips (1658) and Coles (1676).

[6] Included below are a methodological bibliography, still in progress, and links to research programmes.


[8] The antagonistic relationship between emotions and reason has been dubbed the "myth of the passions" by Robert Solomon. Antonia Damasio, more humoristically, refers to it as "Descartes’ error."

[9] This can be ascertained merely by referring to Solomon’s pioneering study, which identifies the appraisal of emotions perceived as judgements; The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life (1976; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).


[12] A valuable distinction between utilitarian and aesthetic emotions is put forward by Klaus Scherer in his study on musical emotions, "Which Emotions Can be Induced by Music? What Are the Underlying Mechanisms? And How Can We Measure Them", Journal of New Music Research 33.3 (2004): 239-51 (pp. 241-44).


Thomas Dixon views the shift from passions to morally neutral emotions in light of the secularisation of psychology as early as the 18th century. A Cambridge Theology graduate, Dixon takes into account philosophical, religious and theological dimension when assessing the emergence of the concept of emotion, and adopts a position which he terms "revisionist." He thus questions the theories put forward by Solomon and his followers, criticising a hasty confusion between passions and emotions. According to Dixon, "the myth of the passions" is, on the contrary, the result of recent developments. From Passion to Emotion: The Creation of a Secular Psychology (2003; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).


See, for instance, Barbara Rosenwein’s suggested method. She encourages lexical study as a prelude to studying affective communities, "Emotion words," in Boquet & Nagy, op. cit., pp. 93-106.

Attention will be paid, for example, to the concept of "emotive" coined by William Reddy, who recently returned to this issue in an interview with Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: an Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns," History and Theory 49 (May 2010): 237-65 (p. 240).

For an analysis of the methodological problems raised by the silence of textual and/or iconographic sources on the question of emotions, cf. Boquet & Nagy (dir), op. cit., p. 41.