Romantic Feelings: Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of Emotions

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Reference


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Introduction
Alberto and I are glad to welcome you to the Louis Jeantet Auditorium on the occasion of the international conference “Romantic feelings: Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of Emotions”, which has been possible thanks to the funding of the Swiss National Science Foundation, *La Maison de l’histoire* and *l’Académie Suisse de Sciences Médicales*, as well as the academic support of the *Institute for the History of Medicine and Health* at the University of Geneva and the research group *HIST-Ex “Emotional Studies”* based at the Centre of Human and Social Sciences in Madrid, Spain. Furthermore, the involvement of other scholars belonging to the University of Geneva coming from the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Psychology, the Swiss Center for Affective Sciences and the Institute of Biomedical Ethics, has been essential in order to launch this project as a real multidisciplinary forum aimed at discussing the evolving meaning of emotions. I should also thank all participants, who have made the effort to attend this conference travelling from Boston, London, Oxford, Serbia, Calabria, Paris, Pamplona and Madrid. I am really touched to notice amongst them today those who once taught me the importance of emotions in the philosophical, scientific and historical enterprise whether it was by means of the study of Romanticism or by introducing me to the History of Emotions.

With the holding of this conference, we would like to create challenges in emotion research by means of thinking about the value of Romanticism from our contemporary interest for the history of emotions. With this aim in mind, the first problem that we propose to address is a methodological question, which is at the heart of current discussions in emotion history: in what terms should we approach the study of this heterogeneous period, in which were discussed diverse conceptions of the physiological, moral and aesthetic dimensions of sensibility that included in some cases, references to entities such as the soul and the humours or the heart, while others focused on the nature of the nervous system and the brain?

With the title of this conference “Romantic Feelings” we attempt to provide an exploratory category to navigate within the disparate late 18th and early 19th affective experiences, which
were usually termed as passions, feelings and sentiments but, in any case, were equivalents to our contemporary understanding of emotions. In this sense, the first problem that this conference deals with is the historical translatability of emotions bearing in mind that, even today, we are neither in possession of a common definition of what is an emotion, nor do we have an agreement about the main methods that should be used in order to write the history of the passions, sentiments and feelings of people living in past societies.

As Thomas Dixon pointed out in his seminal work published in 2003, the meaning of our current notion of emotion is a recent invention, which was the result of the secularisation of 19th century psychology. Although the term emotion was already used by René Descartes in his Passions de l’âme as “a special sort of perception (...) caused by the agitation of the animal spirits”, in the early 19th century it would signify “a disturbance of the mind, a vehemence of passion” that had nothing to do with the evolutionary meaning that would be introduced by Charles Darwin in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Therefore, we put forward “Romantic feelings” as an analytical tool through analogy to Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s “epistemic things”, which designates emergent objects of empirical research in different contexts of exploratory experimentation, when our knowledge about them is irremediably defined by their vagueness. The characteristic vagueness of Romantic feelings responds to the fact that this period is at the heart of Dixon’s shift from passions to emotions. We are dealing neither with the passions as affections of the soul that alter the humours in our bodies nor with emotions as products of the brain and the nervous system. From an historical perspective, Romantic feelings are “in between” a classical and a modern conception of our affective life embodying “what one does not yet know”.

Even though this lack of precision made the understanding of what we are speaking about difficult, this is just where the interest of examining the historical complexity of Romantic Feelings lies, as they seem to be crucial to understanding our contemporary fascination for

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1 Peter Burke, “Is there a Cultural History of Emotions?” In: Penelope Gouk and Helen Hills, Representing emotions, p. 35.
emotions from a genealogical point of view. By examining the relationships between past and present conceptions of emotions, what we are attempting to do is a kind of “history of the present” aimed at throwing light on the main transformations that led us to our contemporary structures of feeling love, hope, jealousy, melancholy or despair. Bearing this purpose in mind, we will explore to what extent Romantic feelings embody continuities and discontinuities with previous and further emotional regimes by looking firstly at the evolving meanings of emotion terms in late 18th and early 19th British and French dictionaries.

In the 1828 edition of the Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, we find a brief definition of feeling as an “expression of great sensibility” which does not greatly clarify its meaning as it refers to another concept of no less complexity at that time: sensibility. In turn, the entry for sensibility distinguishes two senses for this capacity: the first is related to a type of physiological sensation, a delicate affection perceived by the soul or the mind, while the second refers to a moral perception that results from being “affected by moral good or ill”. Thus, in the early 19th century, sensibility seemed to imply a wide notion of experience as “a way of knowing and feeling”, which concerns with equal importance the empirical information provided by our senses and the capacity of having a “sentiment, a thought, an opinion”. Therefore, Romantic feelings should be conceived as a broad category, which included not only sensory perceptions such as sight, smell or physical sensations such as pain and pleasure, but also more refined affective experiences with a cognitive dimension that would gradually be defined throughout the 19th century as being independent from the sensory system and the faculty of the will.

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9 Lorraine Daston, Elizabeth Lünbeck, Histories of Scientific Observation. Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 2. The convergence of scientific and artistic experience was the main purpose of the Romantic philosophical project and, namely, of the so-called German movement Naturphilosophie.


11 Dixon, 2003, p. 71. In German, this affective faculty was called « Gefühle » and revealed its autonomy since Kant’s Kritik der Urteilskraft.
The vagueness that characterises Romantic Feelings is particularly well represented in the picture that we have chosen to announce this conference, *La pluie d’orage*, a drawing which Victor Hugo made during his visit to Geneva in 1839 portraying the lake under a fine rain, which blurred the contours of the mountains just before the storm broke. Hugo added a narrative description accompanying the visual representation of this landscape that emphasised in what extent Romantic feelings were imagined as the central relationship linking nature and the self\(^2\).

Je voyais le lac au-dessus des toits, les montagnes au-dessus du lac, les nuages au-dessus des montagnes, et les étoiles au-dessus des nuages. C’était comme un escalier où ma pensée montait de marche en marche et s’agrandissait à chaque degré. Vous avez remarqué comme moi que, le soir, les nuées refroidies s’allongent, s’aplatissent et prennent des formes de crocodiles. Un de ces crocodiles noirs nageait lentement dans l’air, vers l’ouest ; sa queue obstruait un porche lumineux bâti par les nuages au couchant ; une pluie tombait de son ventre sur Genève ensevelie dans les brumes ; deux ou trois étoiles éblouissantes sortaient de sa gueule comme des étincelles. Au-dessous de lui, le lac, sombre et métallique, se répandait dans les terres comme une flaue du plomb fondu. Quelques fumées rampaient sur les toits de la ville. Au midi, l’horizon était horrible. On n’entrevoyait que les larges bases des montagnes enfouies sous une monstrueuse excroissance de vapeurs. Il y aura une tempête cette nuit\(^3\).

After having read Victor Hugo’s poetic impressions on the Lake of Geneva, a second inevitable methodological question comes to us. Are we dealing with the same objects and/or linguistic representations, when we speak about “feelings” in English and *sentiments* in French? In bringing together presentations in both languages, this conference seeks to challenge not only the translatability of emotions terms in diachronic but also in synchronic ways by means of comparing two different linguistic universes in which Romanticism was not shaped in similar social conditions. In doing so, we assume -according to Barbara Rosenwein\(^4\) - that an emotional regime cannot be approached as being homogeneous in a particular historical period. Have the same connotations been observed in the celebration of melancholy in John Keats, Mary Shelley and René Chateaubriand’s work? Surely not, as

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melancholy acquired different proportions, whether it was expressed by a young Keats’ suffering from consumption, a women writer defying the longstanding male tradition of the male melancholic genius or by a Chateaubriand who had experienced exile with the outbreak of the French Revolution\textsuperscript{15}. Moreover, if we take into account the variations between different social groups, cultures and subcultures, i.e. “emotional communities” expressing themselves in various national contexts, the heart of our research on Romantic Feelings appears irremediably marked by the discontinuity\textsuperscript{16}.

La discontinuité est par définition au cœur d’une recherche qui vise à établir un dialogue sur les sentiments romantiques dans le milieu anglophone et francophone car nous ne sommes même pas certains de parler aujourd’hui de la même chose quand on revendique une histoire des émotions en anglais ou ce qui semble être l’expression en français la plus adéquate selon Damien Boquet et Piroska Nagi, « une histoire de l’affectivité couvrant un large domaine allant des dispositions affectives et des traits de caractère aux sentiments durables et aux émotions qui, en français, désignent clairement un mouvement psychique bref, le plus souvent reflété par le corps »\textsuperscript{17}.

A la fin du XVIIIe siècle, le dictionnaire de l’Académie française de l’An II de la République précisait plusieurs définitions du terme « sentiment » qui sont parfois difficiles d’intégrer ensemble comme « la faculté qu’a l’âme de recevoir l’impression des objets par les sens », mais qui se dit encore « de la sensibilité physique » et « des passions, et de tous les mouvements de l’âme » comme « l’amour, la haine, la crainte, l’espérance ou le désir ». De plus, dans cette définition, nous pouvons apprécier un commentaire qui ajoute que le sentiment « surtout depuis quelques années » est un synonyme de sensibilité, c’est-à-dire du fait « d’avoir l’âme sensible, délicate»\textsuperscript{18}. Si nous jetons un coup d’œil sur l’entrée dédiée à l’émotion dans ce dictionnaire publié seulement trois ans après l’éclat de la Révolution française, il ne doit pas nous étonner qu’elle fasse référence à « une altération, un trouble, un


\textsuperscript{17} Damien Boquet, Piroska Nagy « Une histoire des émotions incarnées », Médiévales 61, automne 2011, p. 5-24. See also, Piroska Nagy, Damien Boquet, Le Sujet des émotions au Moyen Âge, Paris : Beauchesne.

\textsuperscript{18} Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, 1793, p. 558.
mouvement excité dans les humeurs, dans les esprits ou dans l’âme » qui est étroitement liée au sens politique de ce terme, c'est-à-dire, « à la disposition dans le peuple à se soulever »19.
La conclusion que nous pouvons tirer de cette brève comparaison entre la langue française et anglaise dont nous allons examiner les sentiments romantiques au tournant du XIXe siècle est que les champs sémantiques varient en fonction des réalités historiques et politiques en s’articulant avec les codes et normes de chaque société. Malgré les discontinuités apportées par l’expression en deux langues, nous allons essayer d’établir un dialogue commun pour permettre de comparer les particularités des sentiments, passions et des autres affections dans ces deux univers linguistiques.
Néanmoins, les discontinuités que nous proposons ici d’examiner n’impliquent pas seulement des accents différents et parfois en exile, mais aussi des ruptures plus profondes d’un point de vue épistémologique. Cette lecture discontinuiste de l’histoire assimile comme point du départ que le problème de la transition d’une période à un autre doit avoir une formulation explicitement philosophique20. Il n’est pas question de substituer la catégorie du « discontinu », à celle non moins abstraite et générale du « continu ». « La discontinuité n’est pas (…) un vide monotone impensable, qu’il faudrait se hâter de remplir par la plénitude morne de la cause» car elle doit être comprise comme un jeu de transformations spécifiques, différentes les unes des autres (…) et liées entre elles selon les schémas de dépendance»21.

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Romanticism seems to have represented a discontinuity with previous epochs involving a turning point in the longstanding Western philosophical tradition that had celebrated throughout centuries the virtues of reason over the affective dimension of the human being, and inverting what Robert C. Solomon called “the myth of the passions”22. In Solomon’s view, the Romantic project should be understood as a rebellion against the archaic codes and eternal virtues of Classicism, and the Enlightenment” by proposing alternatively “experiment and change, development and evolution”23. A similar interpretation had already been proposed by Charles Baudelaire in the Salon of 1846, when he defined Romanticism as a

21 Michel Foucault, “Réponse à une question”, in : Dits et écrits, T. I, p. 680.
rupture whose novelty consisted of being “precisely situated neither in the choice of the subject nor in the exact truth, but in a way of feeling”\textsuperscript{24}. What Baudelaire was pointing out with this definition, was not only that art was a matter of inspiration and communication of emotions, but that romantics had also become aware that there were different epochs of feeling.

History made the difference between the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and the early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries becoming the distinctive mode in which knowledge and man would be constituted as true\textsuperscript{25}. According to Michel Foucault, “for history in its classical form, the discontinuous was both the given and the unthinkable: the raw material of history, which presented itself in the form of dispersed events (...); the material, which, through analysis, had to be rearranged, reduced, effaced in order to reveal the continuity of events”\textsuperscript{26}. Indeed, romantics introduced themselves as moderns, who had realised the limits of the classical representation – the poet’s imitation of nature-, while becoming an individual psyche that illuminated reality from its subjective point of view\textsuperscript{27}. From this perspective, romantics regarded themselves as living in a period of emotion change in which feelings, passions and sentiments had become historical\textsuperscript{28}.

Chateaubriand expressed this turning point in his Mémoires d’outre tombe, the autobiography that portrayed his life as a long voyage from the Ancient to the Modern World through which the individual was shaped as an historical being full of contradictions, just as the changing values of the epoch in which he lived.

\textit{Quand la mort baissera la toile entre moi et le monde, on trouvera que mon drame se divise en trois actes. Depuis ma première jeunesse jusqu’en 1800, j’ai été soldat et voyageur ; depuis 1800 jusqu’en 1814, sous le consulat et l’empire, ma vie a été littéraire ; depuis la restauration jusqu’au aujourd’hui, ma vie a été politique (...) Si j’étais destiné à vivre, je

représenterais dans ma personne, représentée dans mes mémoires, les principes, les idées, les événements, les catastrophes, l’épopée de mon temps, d’autant plus que j’ai vu finir et commencer un monde, et que les caractères opposés de cette fin et de ce commencement se trouvent mêlés dans mes opinions. Je me suis rencontré entre les deux siècles comme au confluent de deux fleuves ; j’ai plongé dans leurs eaux troublées, m’éloignant à regret du vieux rivage où j’étais né, et nageant avec espérance vers la rive inconnue où vont aborder les générations nouvelles (...) Les diverses sentiments de mes âges divers, ma jeunesse pénétrant dans ma vieillesse, la gravité de mes années d’expérience attribuant mes années légères, les rayons de mon soleil, depuis son aurore jusqu’à son coucher donnent une sorte d’unité indénissable à mon travail : mon berceau a de ma tombe, ma tombe a de mon berceau, mes souffrances deviennent des plaisirs, des douleurs(...)  

Most recently William Reddy has pointed out that French Romanticism represented a discontinuity with late 18th century sentimentalism as it implied the rejection of the culture of feeling that led to the outbreak of the revolution. According to Reddy’s theory, Romanticism was involved in the rise of a new type of internal space in which “moral uncertainty and ambiguity supplanted the fervent clarity of late sentimentalism in France”30. In this early 19th century emotional regime, the interior man was ineffable in his essence and his passions should be controlled by reason and will, revealing a shift of attitude as a result of the suffering provoked by the Terror in France. In Reddy’s view, Romantic feelings did not play a central role in the public, but rather in the private realm where people broke down in tears31.

By contrast to late 18th century France, a period in which tears were used as the collective expression of the revolution, early 19th century tears would be held back, except in intimate situations, becoming the physical proof of the truest feeling, or –what Byron called- “the test of affection” when we are dealing with love and friendship.

When Friendship or Love

Our sympathies move;
When Truth, in a glance, should appear,
The lips may beguile,
With a dimple or smile,
But the test of affection's a Tear32.

However, Romanticism has not always been interpreted as a mere discontinuity, but as the culmination of a change of paradigm in Thomas Kuhn’s terminology, which began with late 17th century experimental investigations on the physiological foundations of sensibility33. As Georges S. Rousseau has pointed out, Jean-Jacques Rousseau “Je sens, donc je suis” is more the end than the beginning of a revolution, whose manifestos were Thomas Willis’ *Pathology of the Brain* (1667) and John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690)34. This brain-nervous revolution, which inaugurated a model of man as a creature of the nerves, would pave the way for the understanding of sensibility as an “emotional state of the mind”35. Seen in this light, Romantic feelings were the result of a long-term cult of sensibility, which was accompanied by the development throughout the 18th century of a theory of perception that explained “not only feelings of every sort, but also the diversity and complexity of passions”36. Therefore, it is only proper to speak on Romanticism before a revolution in knowledge about the nervous man, when this neurological legacy became internalised as the framework for the quest for the truth of modern subjectivity.

Bearing in mind the vast literature available on Romanticism and the emotions37, the objective of our conference is the exploration of continuities and discontinuities in the representations of feelings, sentiments and passions in relation to the body in health and disease; a body, which is not only conceived as an object of knowledge in literature, the arts and the sciences,

but also as a metaphor to picture the world of politics. The reason to choose the body as the place in which to investigate the dimensions of Romantic Feelings stems from the fact that it became a symbolic site in which converged the spiritual mind and the physical nature, an organism “in which all parts were so united that each becomes mutually cause and effect of the other”.

Fay Bound Alberti will open this conference presenting a keynote speech on the nature and origin of the modern self which discusses Romantic views on the anatomical seats of sensibility that made reference alternatively to organs such as the brain and the heart. While romantics pursued the idea of restoring the heart as a symbol of affectivity and, namely of supreme love, the creation of speculations about the nervous system such as Luigi Galvani’s animal electricity and the development of a mind science that defined the modern self as a cerebral subject were of no less importance at that time. Nike Fakiner will continue with the exploration of this cerebral interpretation of feelings by examining Alexander von Humboldt’s romantic legacy in the German anatomical tradition of Gustav Zeiller’s wax models. In his turn, Julien Zanetta will go into depth on the aesthetic dimension of Romantic feelings by discussing Charles Baudelaire’s ambivalent attitudes towards Romantic ideals.

Afterwards, Patrizia Lombardo will help us to think about the cultural meaning of the heart through her analysis of the French Romantic literary tradition represented by François Chateaubriand and Stendhal, in which this organ acquired the status of a symbol that allows the overcoming of false contrapositions between reason and emotions. Following this presentation on the significance of the heart, Isabelle Pitteloud proposes to carry out an analysis on the so-called Stendhal syndrome in the light of the experience that this author underwent during his 1817 visit to the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence. Finally, Marie Noëlle Schurmans will close this section with a contribution dealing with the sociological dimensions of the Romantic heart, which explores the historical origins of our conception of falling in love at first sight that, in French, is metaphorically termed through a beautiful

Taking Goethe’s condemnation of Romantic subjectivity as sickness, the second section of this conference, “Reading disease in Romantic Bodies”, attempts to shed light on the pathological expression of feelings, which were frequently termed in medical discourse as “passions”. As Pilar Leon Sanz will argue, Romantic views on emotions involve a shift in the understanding of the production and modification of disease as is shown by the creation of a new literary genre devoted to this subject and published since the 1780’s in the USA. Thanks to Thomas Dodman and Micheline Louis Courvoisiere’s presentations, we will have the opportunity to go further in the analysis of nostalgia and melancholy, two diseases which were perceived as a veritable mal du siècle in late 18th and early 19th Western World. These studies on nostalgia and melancholy will lead us to close the morning session of Tuesday with Javier Ordonnez’s insights on suicide, a social phenomenon, which became a plague in Romantic Europe after the publication of Goethe’s Werther, coinciding with its problematisation as a medical concern in Philippe Pinel and Jean Etinne Esquirol’s psychiatry.\(^\text{42}\)

The two first presentations of Tuesday afternoon will be devoted to discussing Romantic medical perceptions towards madness, which defined it more as an exaggeration of passions than a trouble of reason.\(^\text{43}\) On the one hand, Juan Rigoli will propose an investigation exploring the early 19th century French etiological psychiatric interpretations of insanity, which focused on the analyses of heart dysfunctions. On the other, Javier Moscoso will extend our views on the pathological dimensions of Romantic feelings by studying the case of jealousy as an exemplary affective experience nourishing the logic of suspicion, which is at the heart of early 19th century French psychiatric accounts such as those of Esquirol. From the understanding of passions as causes of mental disturbance we will continue to an alternative medical conception of feelings such as elements of health, which were included in the therapeutics of Joseph Ennemoser’s mesmerism as Luis Montiel will explain to us. Finally, Guillermo de Eugenio will address the question of the curative powers of imagination by


focusing his presentation on the pamphlet of John Haygarth, *Of the Imagination as a cause and as a cure of disorders of the body* (1800).

The session of this conference, which will take place on Wednesday morning will be devoted to shedding light on the role of Romantic feelings in relation to body politics. Thanks to Eva Botella’s presentation, the importance of Romantic feelings will be re-evaluated in order to comprehend the definition of the notion of personhood in 19th century International Law. Furthermore, Rachel Hewitt and Lorenzo Santoro will thoroughly study hope and disillusionment; fear and happiness as collective emotions, which shaped the national physiognomy of Great Britain and the future unification of the Italian state.

The final section entitled “Natural Languages/Languages of Nature” proposes to understanding the emotional body in connection with literary texts as proposed by Vensa Elez, scientific contributions such as those of Gauss and Cauchy as suggested by Jean Dhombres and music compositions as examined by Bernardino Fantini in his presentation. As we have already said, our attempt with the holding of this conference is to write a kind of history of the present having the power of destabilising our contemporary understanding of emotions by means of the study of how people felt in the past. In this respect, a topic such as Romantic Feelings can help us to comprehend why emerged at that period the idea that passions, feelings, and sentiments have a history; an idea, which has reappeared with force in our times under the heading of the history of emotions. Indeed, the Romantic project as much as the history of emotions have a same objective to reveal that the human being cannot be understood by the mere capacity of abstract thinking.

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