Sixteenth-Century Classifications of Passions and their Historical Contexts

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How did men and women from the past make sense of their emotional life, and of the parallel experience they had of that of their neighbours? Cultural history has promised to provide tools that may allow us to adventure into fields of enquiry that would have appeared at best shaky, if at all interesting, only a few generations ago. Medievalists have played a prominent role in recent research. Take, for instance, Barbara Rosenwein's influential category of "emotional community", which defines groups sharing particular norms of emotional valuation and expression, with the idea that different communities coexisted, and some were dominant at times. Or Damien Boquet's work on *L'ordre de l'affect au Moyen Âge*, and the use of lexicology at the service of a historical anthropology he brings in his analysis of twelfth-century mystics.[1] Perhaps there is still scope for enriching our acquaintance with the sixteenth-century scene, a period whose religious, political and military turbulence cannot have left the consciousness of its protagonists, victims and witnesses unmarked. The present essay is intended as a small contribution in that direction – more in the register of the report from work in progress than in that of accomplished research.

In 1562 Pietro Perna, the well-known Dominican friar from Tuscany who had converted into Protestantism and fled to Basel where he established a flourishing activity as a publisher and bookseller, printed an octavo treatise in three books "on the restraint of the passions of the mind through moral philosophy and the medical art" (*De compescendis animi affectibus, per moralem philosophiam et medendi artem*).[2] It was the work of Luigi Luigini, a contemporary

1 Rosenwein, 2006; Boquet, 2005. Among recent surveys of the field and its potentials see Rosenwein, 2012.

2 Cf. Perini, 2002.

physician from the north-eastern Italian region of Friuli, and was dedicated to another Italian physician, Giovanni Antonio Sicco, by addressing him as *optimus medicus* perhaps somehow playfully, considering that the latter was the author of a treatise *De optimo medico*. Although passions were a frequent topic of medical and philosophical discussion, during the sixteenth century as in many other times, dedicated tracts, even if of limited size, appeared less frequently: we may therefore take advantage of this particular one for a glance on the way the subject matter could be approached and assessed at the time of publication.[3]

While the second and third book dealt, respectively, with a survey of the most significant among the individual passions and a guidance on how best to control them, the first may offer matter more directly relevant for our reflection today since it contains a more general assessment of the subject. The author starts with an introduction to such topics as the tripartition of the soul and the relationship between soul and body, which he describes partly as the ground of an agreement between Plato and Aristotle, partly by recalling their nuances, as well as the position he finds in the medical writings of Galen. The specific topic of passions is subsequently introduced by positioning the author's disciplinary perspectives and aims: he is going to discuss them as philosophers do for spiritual improvement (*ad animi perfectionem*) and physicians for the sake of health (*ad corporis sanitatem*), well aware that he is excluding at least a third viewpoint, that of rhetoricians, that is, the field of emotional persuasion.

When dealing with the definition, genres and parts, as well as the origin of passions, Luigini offers his reader a synthetic presentation of the two main contending positions the classical philosophical tradition had to offer on the point: Stoicism vs Aristotelianism. Although the vocabulary and mental maps were not static, the above mentioned schools still provided the most popular taxonomies and value systems by which early modern writers made sense of the feelings and psychological conditions of individuals and – particularly within the context of a religious mode of writing – suggested paths to a good life. According to a simplified scheme that was nevertheless popular at the time, Stoics, on one hand, regarded passions as always negative and in need of eradication; they listed four as key ones, resulting from the intersection of two variables: they could refer to good or to evil, and be applied to the present or the future. On the other hand, Peripatetics regarded passions as per se neutral and worthy to be experienced in moderation; in particular, the Thomistic series (totalling eleven), the object of systematic analysis within Aquinas's *Prima secundae*, expanded the Stoic criteria of classification by adding to present and future a third dimension – that

3 Luisinus, 1713; Siccus, 1551.

of passions not yet attained or suffered – and included a third set of variables: whether, in a fundamentally Platonic psychology, passions developed within the concupiscible or else the irascible power of the soul.[4]

Luigini is conscious of the fact that the conflicting orientations affect the very definition of the object of enquiry and, following Galen, initially adheres to a Stoic assessment of passion (*pathos* or *affectus*) as "an unnatural motion of the soul against the rightful reason" (*aversa a recta ratione contra naturam animi commotio*, p. 13f.). His description of such a view of the human psyche is followed by a presentation of the Peripatetic stance, according to which passions occupy a middle ground between virtues and vices, and therefore do not per se deserve either praise or blame. Indeed, in the end the Italian physician finds the Aristotelian tenet, that passions are inborn to humans and cannot be totally eradicated, as the most convincing one. The final chapter sets up the usefulness of a discussion of the subject and the way it will be achieved over the following books. Luigini points out that the soul needs healing as much as the body, and promises his reader to provide instructions for both prevention and cure.

In his famous treatise *Les passions de l'âme*, published by Elzevier in Paris and Amsterdam at the end of 1649, just a couple of months ahead of the author's death, René Descartes boldly stated that nothing useful had been written before him on the subject and that he was breaking brand new ground (as the opening sentence puts it, "Il n'y a rien en quoi paraisse mieux combien les sciences que nous avons des anciens sont défectueuses qu'en ce qu'ils ont écrit des passions"; a statement followed, later on within the same initial article, by the author's justification of his choice and style: "C'est pourquoi je serai obligé d'écrire ici en même façon que si je traitais d'une matière que jamais personne avant moi n'eût touchée"). In Descartes's *Passions* critics have identified two interweaving discourses, one actually new, which turns page in the literature on the subject by subtracting it from the domain of the moral discourse and changing it into some kind of physics (a position to which Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza also adhered); another one, however, resting rather inertially on tradition, and the various lines of teaching and problematization of the world of passions Descartes himself would have heard and read over the years in his own philosophical formation.[5]

4 Cf. Levi, 1964, p. 7-39; James, 1997, p. 29-64; Konstan, 2006; Rosenwein, 2006, p. 32-56; Miner, 2009. Cf. also the Italian translation of Aquinas Tommaso d'Aquino, 2002.

5 Descartes, 1990, p. 37f. Cf. – within a vast body of literature – Descartes, 1988; (for a political reading) Kahn, 2006.

Carole Talon-Hugon speaks of a *doxa* shared by French writing on the passions during the first half of the seventeenth century – a very productive period and cultural environment in the literature on the subject. Together with Stoicism and Aritotelianism (which we have already found selected by Luigini as most representative), she includes Galenism and Augustinianism among the most influential orientations. What she finds, however, is that, despite their differences, followers of all four schools shared fundamental traits of their approach. Such consensus comprised the definition of the nature of the passions, conceived as motions of the sensitive soul, by which we attempt to move closer to a good or avoid some harm. It regarded the individual body's complexion as predisposing but not decisive in causation. It warned about the damage many passions tend to provoke, but also recognized the benefits that may derive from others, ultimately prescribing a good use of them. Talon-Hugon registers a unity that went even beyond the doctrinal contents of the pre-Cartesian literature and included rhetorical devices, from the use of a stock of comparisons and metaphors to the exhibition of meaningful historical, mythological and biblical examples. A fortiori, this is a picture that casts significant light on the European panorama we find in the preceding century, the sixteenth.[6]

In considering the literature in circulation at the time that may have influenced the way in which passions were conceptualized and people made sense of them, we should remember that the topic was touched upon, often systematically, by texts written in a variety of modes and literary genres – including, for instance, instructions for religious edification and spiritual guidance. To give an example of their popularity, scholars recall among them Lorenzo Scupoli's *Il combattimento spirituale*, a work first published in Venice in 1589, of whose editions and translations the Bibliothèque nationale de France alone holds more than 300 copies.

Talon-Hugon's comments on the rhetoric of seventeenth-century treatises may work as a useful reminder of the relevance of language: thus, a brief excursion on that matter may not be inappropriate here. Any social history of language tends to investigate "who speaks what language to whom and when". We can take for granted that this is not a superficial, interchangeable clothing, but a form that has, with its content, a relationship of mutual influence. For a Renaissance writer and/or publisher, the choice between Latin or vernacular depended on a range of variables: from the subject matter and literary genre, to

6 Talon-Hugon, 2002. Donini, 2008, p. 196 points out that, in his treatise *The Faculties of the Soul Follow the Mixtures of the Body*, "Galen goes so far as to affirm that soul and its parts actually *are* the temperaments of organs in which they reside".

the cultural, social and national identity of the expected audience. We should not forget that this was also a changing world, with the use of the vernaculars on the increase. The market saw a development of the literature written by and for medical laymen. This is not an extraordinary novelty, if we consider that the Hippocratic tradition regarded hygiene as a knowledge and practice that would allow the public to keep in health and hopefully not need professional help at all. It would be simplistic, though, to imagine that physicians wrote in Latin, whereas amateur medical writers did so in the vernacular. There is the opposite case of humanists who may have preferred to adopt classical languages. And physicians increasingly recurred to the vernacular, or wrote different types of texts in different languages, or else published the same work in more than one language for diverse audiences. The field I am referring to here adds the further complication that it was not a monopoly of medicine; on the contrary, it was an area in which a multiplicity of disciplines and forms of knowledge had something to say.[7] An interesting example for our purpose is offered by the work of the Protestant and Paracelsian physician Joseph du Chesne (Quercetanus), published in the same year (1606) both in Latin as *Diaeteticon polyhistoricon* and in French as *Le pourtraict de santé*.[8] In comparison with books of similar scope, passions occupy a prominent part in it, both for their position (unconventionally, the first matter to be discussed), and for their rank in the whole textual structure: while all the remaining prophylactic instructions are given under two subsequent sections – "Quel est l'office de tout vrai medecin" and "Du régime qui se doit tenir en général, pour la conservation de la santé" – the first part of the volume deals entirely "Des perturbations de l'esprit." Furthermore, in the epistle to the reader the author informs us that the two versions are slightly different: the Latin one is more synthetic, the French richer in examples. It is precisely in the section on passions that they diverge the most. Presumably, the moral implications of that part recommended for it a frequent recourse to the rhetoric of the example: the lay readership of the French version would have looked it up for advice, and found numerous *histoires notables* clearly marked on the margins.

After an initial general chapter *Des perturbations de l'esprit*, his selection, in the list of the following headlines, singles out eight of them: *ambition*, *avarice*, *envie*, *amour voluptueux*, *colère*, *joie*, *crainte* and *tristesse*. The series borders on an enumeration of vices and presents multiple discrepancies with the standard Thomistic one, for instance by failing to include hatred. It seems, however,

7 Cf. Carlino/Jeanneret, 2009; Nicoud, 2010.

8 Du Chesne, 1606; Quercetanus, 1606. Cf. Giacomotto-Charra, 2010; Giacomotto-Charra, 2011; Giacomotto-Charra, forthcoming.

to have had a medical tradition: when Giovanni Lodovico Bertaldi, court physician of the dukes of Savoy, published in 1618 (and again in 1620) his annotations to the *Regole della sanità e della natura de' cibi* [Rules for health and on the nature of foodstuff] circulated under the authorship of the early 15th-century Sienese Ugo Benzi, and now attributed to Benedetto Reguardati of Nurcia (who originally wrote them in Latin),[9] his headlines were exactly the same, with a final addition of drunkenness and of the abuse in the smoking of tobacco. From the beginning, Du Chesne suggests that the wealth of classical writing on the subject gives only a false impression of exhaustiveness, because Christianity has posed the question on completely different grounds; the Platonic analysis and imagery of the parts of the soul is the main building block of the classical tradition he partially saves from damnation. The vulgate according to which the Stoics strived for a complete eradication of the emotions obtains its fairly standard refutation here too. The recommended prevention and cure of troubles of the psyche is compared, in a simile, to the work of a good gardener that clears the terrain of weeds. Unless I am mistaken, Du Chesne adopts, though not systematically, a tripartite anthropology according to which, while all passions seriously affect the body, the first elements of his list (ambition, avarice and envy) primarily pertain to the soul (thus to a discourse he is aware of being ultimately philosophico-theological, rather than medical), the others to the spirit.

If *Le pourtraict de la santé* was dedicated to the Prince of Condé and Du Chesne was consultant and *médecin ordinaire* of the King of France Henry IV, his predecessor, Henry III, had been made homage of another significant moral treatise, one of a more encyclopaedic nature, *L'Académie françoise* by Pierre de La Primaudaye (once again a Huguenot), a work that (to continue on the topic of translations), after its French original, over the last quarter of the sixteenth century also appeared in English, Italian and German. Andrea Bruschi has set *L'Académie* in the context of a series of imagined academies, by which the French aristocracy reconsidered the education of its young generations in the context of the Wars of religion. The fictional context is offered by a conversation between four pupils of the proposed school. La Primaudaye also gives passions a prominent position by including, within the first *journée*, a discussion "des maladies et passions du corps et de l'âme, et de la tranquillité d'icelle", in which his characters lament, among other points, that "l'homme a plus souci du corps que de l'âme"; and distributes individual states of mind among the topics of the following days. Scholars have now taken interest in examining how readers

9 Benzo, 1618. Cfr. Cotton, 1968; Nicoud, 2001.

used such comprehensive sources of information, what marginal notes can tell us of the facts and instruction one looked for and found in them.[10]

Apart (possibly) from the remarks on language, or the reference to the readers' response to La Primaudaye, so far I have offered a narrative one could fairly easily conflate with a rather traditional intellectual history. I am aware it needs to be nuanced and contrasted with sources other that theoretical and prescriptive, in order to get more of a grip of what people actually felt, or rather, to put it in terms of a less literal realism, how they negotiated their life experience with their set of concepts and beliefs, and what feedback effect the former had on the latter. Although many other social groups and types of sources would deserve full attention, we do not need to look much further than the same intellectuals who left us academic treatment of the subject to also find significant autobiographical documentation.

Girolamo Cardano offers a particularly intriguing example. Guido Giglioni has studied his positions on passions and their treatment and found, in seven different works of his, as many different lists of passions identified as the main ones. Still, three seem to be usually prominent in his analysis, that is grief, fear and anger. Since Cardano is also for us a precious source as an autobiographer, it may be worth mentioning that he found a constitutional tendency to anger as rooted in his own family.[11]

Anger – the single passion on which the sixteenth century produced the richest literature – is also the topic of the *Remedium ferendarum iniuriarum sive de compescenda ira* by the physician Girolamo Donzellini, published in Venice in 1586 no more than two years before the author was drowned by the Venetian Inquisition as a relapsed heretic. Donzellini had been already subject to trials, and in the course of them had admitted Protestant convictions and associations in Switzerland. In the end, the Inquisition seems to have had its revenge on him on the basis of his repeated possession of prohibited books. Thus, the *Remedium* bears witness to the spirituality and the anthropology of a significant member of the heterodox milieu of sixteenth-century European physicians. The dedicatory epistle of the lengthy treatise refers to the *multos turbulentos dies* he had recently gone through, a life experience that charges the choice of the topic with profound personal resonance: this was a man who, at the time of writing, had suffered more than his share of injuries, certainly enough to put his anger management to serious test. An interesting point for us would be to assess to what extent and in which direction his religious creed (as well as, I was hinting, his

10 La Primaudaye, 1591. Cf. Bruschi, 2007; Prescott, 2000.

11 Giglioni, 2006.

life experience) may have oriented his position in matter of passions and anger in particular. From the onset of his book, Donzellini states that nothing is more harmful for humans than anger and the desire for vengeance: under their impulse, humans behave like beasts. As well as degrading us to a less than human condition, anger – he continues – harms our health, and it does so more comprehensively than any other passion. It also leads to commit a variety of crimes, from murder to war to the despising of God.

Donzellini's standing requires him to position himself with respect to Aristotelian and Stoic teaching. He agrees with Peripatetics that wrath is natural, but not with their lenient treatment of it as unavoidable and not seriously detrimental. Another target of his criticism is, later on, the Aristotelian concept of the golden mean. It is not true that all extreme affects are vices and all moderate affects are virtues: some noble virtues are extreme, while there is no particular praise attached to moderate vice. On the other hand, following the Church father Lactantius, Donzellini detaches himself from the Stoic tenet too: as still water is unhealthy, so a soul completely deprived of disturbances would turn into a state of immobility, a mental stupor deprived of life. Donzellini agrees with Lactantius also on the idea that who repays a wrong is no better than the person who caused the original injury. He takes this further, by questioning the notion that force is legitimate in self-defence (thus opening a section of his treatise which deals with issues of justice). He discusses the virtues developed in bearing injuries and resisting temptation to vengeance in terms that repeatedly suggest an autobiographical background: he refers to people unjustly prosecuted, imprisoned and killed, as well as to the daily experience of the good suffering, while the evil seem to prosper. This leads him to the need to explain why it should be so. One of his explanations is that God wants us to experience trouble in order to make us fully appreciate, in due course, the privileges of eternal life.[12]

These were only a couple of examples in which self-inspection seems to have played a significant role, or at least – to keep on a safer ground – a discourse involving elements of self-description and analysis is adopted. It should not come as a great surprise that egodocuments as a type of source may offer particularly rich material on the matter of emotions as a topic, nor that historians with a special competence on the former have developed a characteristic interest in the latter. Donzellini also openly speaks of his own time generally, and so did other contemporary writers, whose concern for the subject may derive from the observation of current affairs – politics, religion and public morality – and/or from a preoccupation for the self-control of patrons and dedicatees, as their

12 Donzellinus, 1586; Redmond, 1984, p. 198-232.

works tend to reveal in their paratexts. The full consideration of such liminal texts and of their contexts will give a study of the treatises in question a depth and a historical meaning they may otherwise lack.

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