



# The history of emotions and emotional history

STUART AIRLIE

The appearance of *Anger's Past*, with the prospect of more work on the history of the emotions from Barbara Rosenwein herself, is very welcome. But that prospect is also problematic. It is in some ways a response to Nietzsche's call for a 'critique of moral values, [that] the value of these values should itself be examined'.<sup>1</sup> Values, to which emotions are closely tied, turned out for Nietzsche to be contingent, not constant: to have a genealogy. The master's epigones have gone on to sweep away the notion of an unchanging human identity; the individual subject has turned out to be historically constructed and contingent too and has thus dissolved; Man has vanished. Further, language was to be understood as a master that constructed reality, not merely the medium through which it could be perceived. Thus the good news for historians, that a historical approach to all forms of social experience and value is both appropriate and necessary, is balanced by the bad news that the recapturing of that experience is bound up with all sorts of problems of representation.<sup>2</sup> In its concern with what seems to be such a personal experience as emotion, and in its concern with a medieval past that, particularly before the twelfth century, has left us sources encased in exceptionally rigid conventions and in which individual identity is problematic, a history of the emotions raises in acute form key questions of historical writing, as well as about the otherness of the past, authenticity, experience and representation.<sup>3</sup> Professor Rosenwein's project is, on every level, the opposite of eccentric, and I hope to indicate here some of the

<sup>1</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. C. Diethe and ed. K. Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> There is a helpful introduction to so-called theory in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1995); see, for example, G. Harpham, 'Ethics', *ibid.* pp. 387–405. Currently, historians are perhaps more likely to turn to Foucault or other Parisian masters than to Nietzsche; see J. Goldstein (ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Oxford, 1994). G. Spiegel, 'History, Historians and the Social Logic of the Text', *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 59–86 remains valuable.

<sup>3</sup> K. Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society* (London, 1979), p. 1; K. Leyser, *Medieval Germany and its Neighbours 900–1250* (London, 1982), pp. 241–6. On the individual as historical subject, D.W. Sabeau, *Power in the Blood* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 30–6.

ways in which it relates to work already being done and the problems and opportunities for research posed by such work.

A history of the emotions must be precisely that, namely, historical. We do not have unmediated access to the past, and our own emotional responses to what it has left us offer no short cut to its perception. Even his currently exalted status as guru of cultural studies does not mean that Walter Benjamin's response to the human figures in the Vienna Genesis need have much credibility with professional historians of the Middle Ages ('something very mysterious, not only in their wide-open eyes, ... in the unfathomable folds of their garments, in their ... expression. As if falling sickness had overtaken them'). Benjamin was actually discussing 'the influence of early medieval miniatures on the world of [the Expressionists'] imagination' and historical readings of such images were thus of little concern to him: this may remind us that not all responses to the past can or should be controlled and defined by the academy.<sup>4</sup> Even professional historians, however, may not always be vigilant. In many modern accounts the Middle Ages appears as a period of great emotional scenes. More sober historians than Huizinga have seen it thus. R.W. Southern saw, in John of Salisbury's vivid story of how Pope Eugenius III grovelled in the dust at the feet of a count to beg him to reconsider divorcing his wife, 'a touching illustration of the pope's personal involvement' in such cases.<sup>5</sup> Gerd Althoff has recently argued that we should read such stories very differently. Such accounts of highly charged demonstrations of feeling actually reveal a structured form of communication at work. Thus, Conrad II's tears before his consecration as king in 1024 were a demonstration of his readiness to forgive wrongs done to him before his accession, while his ignoring the urging of his princes to hurry to his consecration and brush aside the petitions of a mere farmer, a widow and an orphan was a demonstration of his kingly qualities as defender of the vulnerable. Such actions had nothing involuntary about them and were not a sign of the anarchic naïveté and spontaneity of a medieval temperament. The nuns of Ganderseim's furious curses while throwing their offerings at the bishop of Hildesheim during mass were not a spontaneous overflow of emotion but a deliberate demonstration, carefully timed for maximum impact, of their rejection of the bishop's claims over their

<sup>4</sup> W. Benjamin, 'Karl Kraus', in W. Benjamin, *Reflections*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York, 1978), 256; Benjamin's view of the emotional style of Late Antique art was influenced by A. Riegl, see C. Rosen, 'The Ruins of Walter Benjamin', in G. Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1991), pp. 129–75 at pp. 134–5. Full weight is given to the role and expression of emotion in early medieval art in H. Mayr-Harting, *Ottoman Book Illumination*, 2 vols. (London, 1991), a highly relevant work in the present context.

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 136.

abbey. As Althoff puts it, 'their behaviour was not uncontrolled, but goal-oriented'.<sup>6</sup>

In its critique of Norbert Elias and its quest for the social meaning of emotional displays, Althoff's work has much in common with Barbara Rosenwein's project. Althoff's primary concern, however, is with symbolic communication and ritual rather than with emotion *per se*, and this means that, despite its value, that work has some limitations from our point of view here. The actual nature of the emotions expressed does not always interest him. He observes that the sadness of Liudolf, son of Otto I, was a prelude to his revolt against his father, but sources on Liudolf's attitude stress his sadness and grief rather than anger. The specific emotion depicted is itself important, not simply its role as herald of rebellion.<sup>7</sup> The system recovered by Althoff is too tight to be entirely convincing as a reconstruction, partly because the response of the audience to demonstrations of emotion could not always be predicted. Henry II of England's dumb-show of anger in the forest of Woodstock may have been carefully worked out in order to overawe the formidable Hugh of Lincoln, but Hugh, who dissolved the king's fury with a jest, cannot have been sure that his joke would provoke laughter rather than more royal *ira*.<sup>8</sup>

Further, there is a textual dimension that needs exploration. Althoff's analysis of the actions of Otto III, for example, as 'demonstrative-ritual behaviour' casts much light on a ruler who can appear emotionally overheated. But Stephan Waldhoff has recently argued that, while an approach such as Althoff's is more satisfactory than the psychological intuition deployed in, for example, Schramm's reading of Thietmar's account of Otto's sighs and floods of tears, 'demonstrative-ritual behaviour' is not the key here. Rather, the key to understanding what seems to be the private *Angst* of Otto III laid bare by Thietmar is chapter 6 of the Gospel of St Matthew, which urges that the truly devout should pray and fast in secret rather than court hypocrisy and vainglory by doing so in front of an audience.<sup>9</sup> What matters are the textual patterns and

<sup>6</sup> G. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1997), p. 264 with pp. 233–5 on Conrad II; in general, see pp. 229–304.

<sup>7</sup> Althoff, *Spielregeln*, p. 30; contrast J.L. Nelson, *The Frankish World 750–900* (London and Rio Grande, 1996), pp. 187–8.

<sup>8</sup> K. Leyser, *Communications and Power in Medieval Europe: The Gregorian Revolution and Beyond* (London and Rio Grande, 1994), pp. 164–5; on Angevin *ira*, see P. Hyam, 'What did Henry III of England Think in Bed and in French about Kingship and Anger?', in B. Rosenwein (ed.), *Anger's Past* (Ithaca and London, 1998), pp. 92–124, at pp. 100–3; the potential danger of reductionism in an approach such as Althoff's is well charted by S.D. White, 'The Politics of Anger', *ibid.*, pp. 127–52.

<sup>9</sup> Thietmar, *Chronicon*, IV, c. 48, ed. R. Holtzmann, *MGH, SRG* (Berlin, 1955), p. 186; S. Waldhoff, 'Der Kaiser in der Krise? Zum Verständnis von Thietmar IV, 48', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 54 (1998), pp. 23–54. For a rather different view, Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination*, I, p. 160; for some valuable general reflections on sources and conventions of representation, T. Reuter, 'Pre-Gregorian Mentalities', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 45 (1994), pp. 465–74, especially at pp. 471–4.

authorial concerns of Thietmar, just as Bruno of Querfurt's picture of Otto's ascetic drive suggests, in Waldhoff's striking phrase, that it is the hagiographer, not the emperor, who is spiritually disturbed.<sup>10</sup> Waldhoff ranges sensitively across such topics as the problems caused for scholars by modern notions of a public-private dichotomy, the need to grasp the role of tears and *compunctio cordis* as necessary accompaniments to prayer, and the need to be sensitive to patterns of conventional piety and devotional practice as well as to the thematic structures of hagiographical and historical narratives. His article deserves a wider readership than those interested only in Otto III.

Walking down the echoing corridors of intertextuality is, however, the start, not the end, of analysis. Conventional practices and texts certainly could evoke stereotypical reactions in stereotypical representations. An Arian bishop could be re-trained by Catholic personnel services: 'Let him be exhorted to convert to the Catholic faith and ... be told to do penance and weep for his sins with a befitting number of tears (*satisfactio lacrimarum*) so that when he had performed his penance and they knew him to be a good Catholic, they might ordain him bishop in some other town'.<sup>11</sup> The sincerity or otherwise of this bishop is not the issue here, but the instrumentalist scheme of *compunctio cordis* is rather different from the tears that burst forth from the dying Bede when the phrase from the antiphon 'do not abandon us as orphans' struck upon his ears. Again, the sincerity or otherwise of Bede's feelings are not the issue here; as Professor Rosenwein remarks above, we need not assume that intimate sources such as this account of Bede's death are, emotionally, authentic. But this episode matters. It is the spark that has helped a sensitive modern interpreter to illuminate Bede's determined efforts to abandon 'earthly for heavenly kinship' and thus explore a central theme in Bede's work, uncovering not only Bede's difference from us but from the norms of his society.<sup>12</sup> This returns us to Richard Southern's distraught pope, whose function in *Western Society and the Church* is not simply to be a peg for anecdote but to be a gateway into a discussion of indulgences and papal power. To adapt Barthes' terminology, these emotional episodes are examples of the *punctum* that can pierce and illuminate the general *studium*, and it is important to hold both in balance.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Waldhoff, 'Der Kaiser in der Krise?', p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Liber Vitae Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, V.xi, ed. A. Maya Sanchez, *Corpus Christianorum*, 116 (Turnholt, 1992), p. 88; translation from A.T. Fear (ed. and trans.) *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers* (Liverpool, 1997), pp. 96–7. On penance in this text, see I. Wood, 'Social Relations in the Visigothic Kingdom from the Fifth to the Seventh Century: The Example of Mérida', in P. Heather (ed.), *The Visigoths from the Migration Period to the Seventh Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 191–208 at pp. 202–3.

<sup>12</sup> *De Obitu Baedae*, in *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1896), I, p. clxi, with translation at pp. lxxiv–v; H. Mayr-Harting, *The Venerable Bede, the Rule of St. Benedict and Social Class* (Jarrow, 1976), p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard (London, 1993), pp. 25–7 and *passim*.

The penitent Arian bishop, the tearful Bede and the pleading pope all appear to us in texts whose codes must be deciphered; they, and their actions, do not speak to us directly but appear in historical contexts and situations, and it is these that should be our focus. Representation is primary but the world is not simply a text. In describing Charlemagne's tears on the death of his children, Einhard was artfully weighing up the king's virtues of *magnanimitas*, *patientia* and *pietas* and providing a textual picture that other writers were to react against. But he was surely also gesturing towards a real historical situation in the life of the historical Charlemagne.<sup>14</sup> Such a situation can only be perceived by us and then rendered by us through signification, rather than reproduction, but it is the past situation and the past culture that concerns us. The history of representations is only a part of the general field of history. Concern with emotion in history takes us directly to basic questions of history writing.

One might turn this round and say that the history of emotions is thus already with us in some contemporary historical writing, though the scale and theoretical self-consciousness of the contributors to *Anger's Past* and of its editor mark an important new step, for early medievalists at least. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that emotional history is already with us; I conclude this piece with a brief look at examples of it that repay study in this context.

First, and most extreme, there is the vast survey of early medieval German history by Johannes Fried, a book welcomed as an 'anthropology of the beginnings of Germany'.<sup>15</sup> This may be so, but if it is anthropology it is not anthropology as we know it. Fried is indeed concerned with the rhythms of the human life-cycle and with the social environment, and he roots his accounts of political history in them to dazzling effect. But his analysis often takes the form of highly charged evocation designed to help us imagine the early Middle Ages as a period whose everyday life was dominated by *Angst*, and as such Fried's book is more likely to remind the anglophone reader of the work of Huizinga than of modern anthropological theory.<sup>16</sup> This need not be a Bad Thing (especially when one considers the dessicated nature of much contemporary academic discourse), but Fried's high-powered subjectivity and evocative approach

<sup>14</sup> Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 19, *Vie de Charlemagne*, ed. L. Halphen (Paris, 1938), p. 60; contrast the Astronomer's *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, c. 20, ed. E. Tremp, *MGH, SRG* (Hanover, 1995), pp. 340–2. I have learned much about Einhard and grief from an unpublished paper by David Ganz, to whom I am grateful.

<sup>15</sup> J. Fried, *Der Weg in die Geschichte. Die Ursprünge Deutschlands bis 1024* (Berlin, 1994); M. Borgolte, 'Eine Anthropologie der Anfänge Deutschlands', *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, 247 (1995), pp. 88–102.

<sup>16</sup> 'Angst durchsetzte alle Lebensformen und beherrschte den Alltag', Fried, *Der Weg in die Geschichte*, p. 106; this sentence is characteristic. For a hostile reaction to Fried's approach see the exchange between him and G. Althoff in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 260 (1995), pp. 107–30; compare S. Airlie in *German Historical Institute London. Bulletin*, 17 (1995), pp. 6–12.

mean that his book can hardly serve as a model for others. The nature of its aims and achievements do, however, deserve attention.

At the opposite extreme from Fried, in its explicit grappling with contemporary theory, is Allen Frantzen's *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America*. The subtitle gives some idea of the range of Frantzen's book, and not every reader of this journal will relish, say, his analysis of *Der Rosenkavalier*. In some ways this is also an intensely and explicitly personal book and that makes it difficult to see it as a model; nor is it for me to endorse it as such. It does, however, offer an immensely stimulating treatment of topics and issues that are relevant here and its importance deserves to be widely signalled. Frantzen combines a command of queer theory with a strong historical sense that means that his task is to challenge that 'deconstruction of hegemonic heterosexuality ... [which] can endlessly manipulate historical conditions as rhetorical affects without approaching the reality of same-sex relations for the men and women who experienced them'.<sup>17</sup> He thus stresses the need to work with medieval categories and the limits to the malleability of texts and meditates on the nearness and otherness of Anglo-Saxon experience and its representation. The end results include a sensitive analysis of Hrothgar's tearful farewell to Beowulf as an expression of love, an analysis that in some ways offers unsurprising conclusions, but what matters is how they have been arrived at – i.e. by a journey through and engagement with, theoretical perspectives.<sup>18</sup> Some readers will shrug off that concern with theory while others will disagree with his conclusions on it, but it is precisely because Frantzen's concern is primarily historical that both sets of readers ought to grapple with it, and its relevance to work on the history of emotions is obvious.

Learning from anthropology, literary theory and perhaps even from 'emotionology' can help the historian in the field of the history of the emotions, but historical questions remain at the centre of such a project. If a 'civilising process' can be detected, we still need to pose the old 'who whom?' questions, as for the Carolingian Renaissance where 'the process of courtization ... was also a transmission, and imposition, of the cultural values of the *clerici* onto the lay nobility'.<sup>19</sup> Universalising theories such as Freud's are of very limited usefulness, and material interests need to be given due weight in emotional schemes.<sup>20</sup> If historical questions

<sup>17</sup> A. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Frantzen, *Before the Closet*, pp. 93–8.

<sup>19</sup> J.L. Nelson, 'History-writing at the Courts of Louis the German and Charles the Bald', in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna and Munich, 1993), pp. 435–42, at p. 436.

<sup>20</sup> H. Medick and D.W. Sabeau, 'Interest and Emotion in Family and Kinship Studies: a Critique of Social History and Anthropology', in H. Medick and D.W. Sabeau (eds.), *Interest and Emotion* (Cambridge and Paris, 1984), pp. 9–27.

can be asked, that means that a history of the emotions is already with us, to an extent.<sup>21</sup> But investigation into the historical nature and experience of the emotions themselves, not simply their 'social uses', now needs to come centre stage. This is the peculiar challenge and attractiveness of a project which needs to avoid the crassness of functionalism as well as the weightlessness of studies of representation. As such, it brings contemporary questions on the writing of history into very sharp focus indeed. At the very least, historians need no longer be teased by Auden's song: 'O tell me the truth about love./Our history books refer to it/In cryptic little notes'.<sup>22</sup>

*Department of History, University of Glasgow*

<sup>21</sup> I am thinking here, for example, of how studies of the history of childhood have focused on the emotional bonds, or lack of them, between parents and children, see J.L. Nelson, 'Parents, Children and the Church', in D. Wood (ed.), *The Church and Childhood, Studies in Church History*, 31 (Oxford, 1994), pp. 81–114. Many other works on family history are also relevant here. The political history of the patrimonial kingdoms of the early Middle Ages necessarily touches on emotional relationships and norms; see, for example, P. Stafford's discussion of motherhood in her *Queen Emma and Queen Edith* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 75–81.

<sup>22</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Some say that love's a little boy', in Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957* (London, 1969), p. 94.