



The study of emotions in early medieval history: some starting points

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The various problems cited by Airlie, Cubitt and Rosenwein as besetting the study of the emotions of early medieval people are obstacles to a larger challenge: that of understanding past individuals and grasping both the particularity of their emotional experience – their inner worlds – and setting those insights into an informed view of the emotional context of their external worlds.¹ Even for those intent on constructing master narratives, the experience of individuals must have a role as a component of that project and as a touchstone for evaluating its success. The challenge of making sense of the emotional worlds of past individuals and cultures seems, at first, to be particularly acute for the early Middle Ages: *‘Das porträtlos Jahrtausend’*, or ‘the millennium without portraits’, as Gerd Tellenbach has characterized it. And as Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us, ‘it is extraordinarily difficult to determine the basic characteristics of the personalities of medieval people’.²

But, of course, the first millennium was not an era entirely without portraits, and though one might deplore the lack of ‘intimate’ personal sources, I believe that there are yet many insights to be won from sensitive and theoretically informed readings of the sources which do exist. It is salutary to remember, too, that even in this present age of Oprah Winfrey and insatiable appetite for personal revelations from celebrities, the study and indeed even the intuitive understanding of present-day emotions is characterized by competing paradigms: witness the disparity between the everyday understanding of the word emotions and the definitional *aporia* cited by Rosenwein, or Susie Orbach’s emphasis on

¹ On correlating inner world and outer world, see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London, 1967), p. 9.

² C. Walker Bynum, review of Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France: Psycho-Historical Essays* (Oxford: 1979), in *Speculum* 55 (1980), pp. 595–7 at p. 597; see also R. Schieffer, ‘Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Biographischer Darstellung frühmittelalterliche Persönlichkeiten: zu dem neuen Hinkmar-Buch von J. Devise’, *Historische Zeitschrift* 229 (1979), pp. 85–95; Tellenbach quotation from p. 85.

the need for emotional literacy in both the private and the public spheres.³ Accordingly, the understanding and interpretation of evidence concerned with the emotions of past individuals is perhaps impeded most severely not so much by their pastness, nor even by their representation in texts (a point to which I shall return), as it is by our own interpretative blind spots. And so whether one is reaching for a grand theory or seeking to understand the inner world of an articulate individual, it is essential to avoid the *a priorism* that would be implied by telling our sources 'I know just how you feel'. Equally flawed would be the response: 'but they couldn't have felt that way, it's just a topos.'

Since we do not have unmediated access to our informants, we will have to read the texts which contain information about emotions with care, accepting the need for a 'hermeneutics of empathy' while guarding against the distortions of projecting our own notions of what people must have thought or felt into their words.⁴ The goal must be to recover the shared understanding of writer and audience, and for letters, of sender and receiver. But the problems of representation may not be as severe as they have sometimes seemed. For if constraint is the constant in culture, as Rosenwein reminds us, then literary conventions and ritual gestures alike can be construed as the meeting point of emotional experience and cultural constraints, shaping and enabling the externalization of emotional experience in culturally familiar patterns, effective for communication even when not 'authentic'.

To focus on emotions in source texts is nonetheless, in a sense, to go against the grain. If the first millennium was not in fact an age without portraits, it was nonetheless an age of remarkable indifference to recording details of personal appearance, a world where mirrors were scarce, a world, apparently, of restricted individuation. For our idiom 'I feel' (ubiquitous above all among North American students) to express an opinion, substitute *scio, novi, audivi, vidi*. Perception, not emotion, was our medieval subjects' language of knowledge, apprehension and opinion. When Alcuin incorporated excerpts from Augustine's *Confessiones* into his unpublished florilegium, he used them not to evoke Augustine the man, but bypassed Augustine's searching introspection to construct prayers, an emphasis that would have pleased Augustine himself. If Christianity can be seen as providing conditions capable of fostering self-awareness and narratives of self-disclosure, it also provided theological perspectives which gave medieval people their own framework for articulating and evaluating emotional states, a framework which does

³ S. Orbach, *Towards Emotional Literacy* (London, 1999), pp. 2–5.

⁴ On empathy, see K. Morrison, *I am You: The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology and Art* (Princeton, 1988); E. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. and trans. S. Hand (Oxford, 1989).

not correspond to modern clinical or popular psychology.⁵ To study the emotions of medieval people on their terms as well as ours, it may be helpful or necessary to juxtapose these two perspectives, the modern psychological and the medieval theological.

With all these caveats in mind, I will suggest some guidelines for the interpretation of medieval peoples' emotions in texts. These starting points were worked out through the study of Alcuin's writings and early medieval letters.⁶ I hope that the artificiality of separating the principles from the interpretative problems which they were devised to solve will be outweighed by the resulting gains in generality and clarity; my intention, however, remains illustrative rather than prescriptive.

A first step will be to reject the widespread notion that dismisses *topoi* in medieval texts as by definition antithetical to the expression and communication of genuine feelings. Such a view is a figment of a post-romantic sensibility, with little relevance to a literary and moral formation which prized authority and example.⁷ Curtius himself made that point, and so it is all the more ironic that (perhaps more through osmosis than sustained reading) his surpassingly erudite *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* has had the effect of popularizing the word *topos* so effectively that it has become a dismissive label bandied about with little sensitivity to the underlying principles of the Latin educational system and poetics which ensured the longevity and vigour of rhetorical commonplaces (for that is what *topoi*, places, are) – a system in which the grammatical and rhetorical was not easily sundered from the moral and ethical.⁸ Clichés? Or shared structures of meaning? While the use of quotations or clichés can in some

⁵ See *inter alia*. G. Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction, trans. E.W. Dicks, 2 vols. (London 1949–50), II, pp. 526–37, emphasizing change and the diversity of factors shaping literary self-disclosure; from another angle, L. Dumont, 'The Modern Conception of the Individual, Notes on its Genesis', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* VIII (1965), pp. 13–61; an expanded version reprinted as 'The Christian Beginnings: From the Outworldly Individual to the Individual-in-the-World' in his *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (London, 1986), pp. 23–59.

⁶ Forthcoming in M. Garrison, *Alcuin's World through his Letters and Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge).

⁷ E.R. Curtius, 'Zur Literaturästhetik des Mittelalters', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 58 (1938), pp. 1–50, 129–232, 433–79, at pp. 139–40; cited and translated by Dronke in his *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000–1150* (Oxford 1970), pp. 18–19.

⁸ E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 1948; trans. 1953 by W.R. Trask (repr. Princeton 1990) (Bollingen Series 36). On the overlap of categories, see J. Ziolkowski, 'The Highest Form of Compliment: *Imitatio* in Medieval Latin Literature' in *Poetry and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: A Festschrift for Peter Dronke* (Mittellateinische Studien und Texte, vol. xxix) ed. J. Marenbon (Leiden, 2001), pp. 292–307 at p. 295; in the same volume, H. Westra's 'Individuality, Originality and the Literary Criticism of Medieval Latin Texts', pp. 281–92 also has much of relevance.

cases provoke legitimate questioning of the veracity of an account,⁹ one should also be aware that apparently prefabricated units of expression (topoi, quotations, allusions and proverbs) may have been chosen precisely because of their communicative power. To assert this possibility is not to claim that topoi have such resonance in every instance, but rather to signal the need for a reading open to a maximal rather than a minimal interpretation of apparently stereotyped expressions. Where there is a proliferation of commonplace or formulaic elements in a text – say, for example, the ubiquitous aphorisms about friendship in the letters of many writers – then the task will be to look at those same elements across the whole corpus of a writer's work, to take note of variations in expression and to correlate instances of clear emphasis or special elaboration with those situations where the context is clear and the affective dimension known. Such an exercise will yield guidelines which can then be invoked where similar formulaic expressions had seemed utterly opaque and inauthentic.

In his *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*, Peter Dronke offered a fundamental reconsideration of Curtius' method and principles which no student of medieval texts, whether Latin or vernacular, can afford to ignore.¹⁰ Dronke demonstrated that a distinctive use of a topos can itself constitute individuality within a tradition; and further, that it is the function of the topos in context, rather than its topicality, which repays study: 'analytic study must constantly be accompanied and complemented by integrative and contextual understanding; the first is accurate only in so far as the second is sensitive.'¹¹ With necessary changes, this reconsideration of the topos applies equally to other structures of meaning. Hence its relevance to historians attempting to study the emotions of medieval people (or rather, to infer their emotions from texts). Caroline Walker Bynum's essay 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual' has illuminated the extent to which the twelfth-century discovery of the self was rooted in 'a sense of models or types.'¹² So to evolve into conformity with an external model, or to represent oneself or another doing that – whether the model was Jerome, the ideal philosopher or Christ – was no stifling of individuality.¹³

⁹ N. Wright, *History and Literature in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West: Studies in Intertextuality* (Aldershot, 1995), pp. viii–ix on how a quotation from Caelius Sedulius (*Carmen Paschale*, iii.23–5) used in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), iii.28, can mislead.

¹⁰ Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, pp. 11–12, but see esp. pp. 1–32 for an analysis of Curtius's suppressed assumptions.

¹¹ Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, the quotation from p. 12, but see pp. 11–12 on the problem of analysis according to topoi and pp. 1–32 more generally for a reconsideration of Curtius and an analysis of his implicit assumptions.

¹² C. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (London 1982), pp. 82–109 at p. 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Models and topoi, then, may be able to convey 'genuine' statements about the experience of the self and they may also be able to serve as the most effective way to communicate or represent aspects of emotions or the inner world to others. In other words, they are not a barrier to interpreting emotional experience, but a potentially privileged access. Alongside models and topoi (the prefabricated structures of meaning), images in texts also call out for study as another potentially privileged route to the emotional experience of the individuals we study. Here I would cite especially the work of Giselle de Nie.¹⁴ Our contemporary cultural assumption that spontaneous expression must be sincere, genuine and authentic is deep-rooted, even intuitive, perhaps borne out by experience – but by our experience in our own culture. To think oneself out of that bias calls for a new kind of subjectivity, for approaching texts with not only finely honed literary sensitivity, but also with a high degree of emotional self-awareness.

To remain aware of the grounds for the cultural bias responsible for the notion that topoi exclude authenticity serves as a reminder of the interpretive distance that separates us from the people we study. Medieval people lived before the Freudian privatization of the unconscious, before modern individualism, alienation and anomie, in a structured world with a shared language of symbols and rituals. The gulf between their social and symbolic world and ours has far-reaching consequences for structures of meaning. Mary Douglas has identified a correlation between social conditions and a society's symbolic order. A clearly articulated social structure with 'strong ritual differentiation of roles' and 'magical efficacy attributed to symbolic acts' will coincide with a 'condensed symbolic system'; in contrast, a society characterized by 'effervescence' and a 'weakly articulated social structure' will favour 'diffuse symbols' and will prefer 'spontaneous expression'.¹⁵ For 'condensed symbolic system' understand topoi and ritual gestures: conventions which do not so much constrain as shape and enable emotional communication according to shared cultural codes.

Alongside the approaches to texts suggested above, there is another recourse to assist the study of medieval peoples' emotions: the judicious use of comparisons. In this category I would cite three examples. First there is Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the*

¹⁴ See for example the pioneering studies of Giselle de Nie: *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam, 1987); 'Word, Image and Experience in the Early Medieval Miracle Story', *Studies in Comparative Literature* 17 (1997), pp. 97–122; and 'Visies op St. Radegunde's "vlammende geest": Zesde en twintigste-eeuwse gevoelspatronen in ideaal, verhaal en beeldspraak' in *Emoties in de Middeleeuwen*, Utrechtse Bijdragen tot de Mediëvistiek 15, ed. R. Stuip and C. Vellekoop (Hilversum, 1998), pp. 49–77.

¹⁵ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1970; repr. New York, 1982) pp. 73–4.

Undoing of Character.¹⁶ Shay, a psychiatrist working with Vietnam veterans, initially turned to the *Iliad* because, in his words, 'the epic gives centre stage to bitter experiences that actually do arise in war';¹⁷ further, he 'makes the claim that Homer has seen things that we in psychiatry and psychology have more or less missed ... in particular Homer emphasizes two common events of heavy, continuous combat: betrayal of "what's right" by a commander, and the onset of the berserk state'.¹⁸ The book juxtaposes the experiences of Achilles with that of Vietnam vets, highlighting both similarities and differences. What happens when the survivors are silenced, as in the case of the vets?

The lesson for medievalists goes beyond the possible relevance of Shay's thesis about the violation of *themis*, the berserk state, and the importance, for survivors of combat trauma, of having their narratives listened to and culturally validated. For it is a salutary reminder both of how much emotional insight can be won even from language as formulaic as Homer's and of how (relatively) incomplete our knowledge of emotions in the contemporary world is. Finally, the book vindicates the value of nuanced cross-cultural comparisons. To assimilate evidence about medieval behaviour to our categories is invariably reductionist, but to use situational similarities to throw differences into relief is not.¹⁹ The underlying assumption of a comparative or cross-cultural study need not be essentialist or ahistorical. It may be precisely the divergences between experience and emotional expression in different contexts which afford illumination. Shay's book was heralded as a major achievement by both classicists and psychiatrists; each acknowledged that the study had brought new insights to their own discipline.

What areas of medieval culture (besides war) might repay similar comparative investigation? One obvious case would be the psychological implications of child oblation.²⁰ My second example, therefore, is Bruno Bettelheim's *Children of the Dream*²¹ and other studies of kibbutzim. For perhaps the closest analogue to an oblate's experience might be derived from contemporary accounts of the psychological consequences of child-rearing in groups with a deliberate (if not always completely successful)

¹⁶ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (London, 1994).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹⁹ For exemplary discussions, see C. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London, 1987), pp. 204–7 on why it is not helpful to label medieval women's religious fasting as *anorexia nervosa*, and R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 143–54 on why the monastic kiss is not inevitably erotic.

²⁰ On the cultural significance of child oblation, see M. de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996).

²¹ B. Bettelheim, *Children of the Dream: Communal Child-Rearing and its Implications for Society* (London, 1969).

attenuation of the intense parent-child bond (with the concomitant ambivalence) so typical of recent Western experience. Of course one must be aware that kibbutzim have been characterized by variety and change, and that the contrast in the child-rearing arrangements of two situations is more important than similarities. Nonetheless, to juxtapose Bettelheim's insights about group identity, individual self-awareness and preferred images of consolation with evidence (for example) about the experience of Alcuin (a child oblate who never mentions his biological parents) or Orderic Vitalis (who does) can reveal the emotional significance of expressions that might otherwise seem to be empty or stereotyped.²²

Yet another theoretical angle which can be profitably invoked by medievalists comes from work on attachment and loss, above all, the work of John Bowlby and those inspired by his approach – the third example.²³ There is a fine and abundant (and ever growing) tradition of scholarship on consolation literature, but grief, the essential precondition for consolation literature, is only beginning to receive its due attention.

Here again, a most respectful and exacting approach to the sources is called for. Yet commentators have often denied medieval expressions of grief – a scholarly version of the same awkwardness that makes many people unable to respond appropriately to the recently bereaved? Thus Eric Auerbach used words like 'blurred and lifeless' in a general judgement on Carolingian literature proffered after a discussion of Einhard's shattering letter to Lupus about his grief and despair after the death of his wife.²⁴ And in Peter von Moos' vast and fundamental *Consolatio* (the essential starting point for the study of Medieval Latin consolation),²⁵ there is the observation that on the whole, grief was no problem for Alcuin.²⁶ In a work as encyclopedic as von Moos', a veritable fichier of Medieval Latin Consolation literature, there could be no question of allowing space for detailed readings of every author cited. A closer look at grief and consolation in Alcuin's writings, however, with due attention paid not only to explicit statements but also to imagery and structure, can show that his inner world bears all the marks of unresolved grief and that this unresolved grief can be persuasively associated with the trauma of early abandonment by his biological parents.²⁷

²² M. Garrison, *Alcuin's World through his Letters and Verse* (forthcoming, Cambridge).

²³ J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* 3 vols., (New York, 1969, 1973, 1980); for the study of grief and consolation literature, I have found particularly valuable N. Leick and M. Davidsen-Nielsen, *Healing Pain: Attachment, Loss and Grief Therapy*, trans. D. Stoner (London, 1991).

²⁴ E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Manheim (London, 1965), p. 122.

²⁵ P. von Moos, *Consolatio: Studien zur Mittellateinischen Trostliteratur Über den Tod und zum Problem der christlichen Trauer*, 4 vols., (Munich, 1971–2).

²⁶ 'Aufs ganze gesehen, erscheint in den Alkuinschen Trostkunst die Trauer kaum je als ein Problem', von Moos, *Consolatio*, III, p. 109.

²⁷ Forthcoming in Garrison, *Alcuin's World*.

The new History of Emotions is poised between a kind of particularism (focusing on emotions rather than psychology, as an earlier generation of studies did) and a dialogue with a master narrative of 'emotionology'. Norbert Elias has supplanted Freud as the creator of a guiding paradigm which influences even those who disagree with his teleological scheme. The brilliant correlation that he was able to see – between micro- and macro-level sociological processes; between, on the one hand, the development of individual restraints and changes in thresholds of embarrassment, and, on the other, larger processes of state formation and the development of central authority – will surely remain a tantalizing example of theoretical acuity even as individual studies by medievalists gradually nuance and recast the notion of a childlike Middle Ages of ungoverned emotions. Surmounting the barriers to interpreting the emotions of the individuals we study calls for a new dialogue between reason, empathy and intuition, informed by self-awareness and scrupulous reading, but also open to the insights of psychology and anthropology.

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