

Historein

Vol 8 (2008)

Performing Emotions: Historical and Anthropological Sites of Affect



A New Species of Man: The Man of Feeling

Jina Politi

doi: [10.12681/historein.38](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.38)

Copyright © 2012, Jina Politi



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Politi, J. (2009). A New Species of Man: The Man of Feeling. *Historein*, 8, 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.38>

Ben Jonson's play *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) contains the following dialogue:

- Winfife* What call you the reverend elder you told me about?
- Littlewit* Rabbi Busy, sir, he is more than an elder, he is a prophet, sir.
- Quarlus* O, I know him! A baker, is he not?
- Littlewit* He was a baker, sir, but he does dream now, and see visions; he has given over his trade.
- Quarlus* His Christian name is Zeal-of-the-Land-Busy . . . A notable hypocritical vermin it is; I know him . . . ever in seditious motion . . . of a most lunatic conscience and spleen . . . he defies all other learning than inspiration.

The “passion” under attack in this play is *enthusiasm*. The word, which derives from the Greek *ενθουσιασμός*, means that the “enthusiast” is possessed by a god. His discourse is a mediating discourse directed by divine inspiration and marked by intense, religious fervour. God’s message to his people, transmitted through the inspired prophet, consists of a critique of the corrupt, present order of things and the necessity of its annihilation through the establishment of an incorrupt, new world order. Social revolt, the Bible taught, had the sanction of Almighty God as it was ethically motivated. Thus, in Quarlus’ negative description of Rabbi Busy the key phrase is that the man is “ever in *seditious* motion”. What this implies is that in the seventeenth century the concept of “enthusiasm” was undergoing a semantic transformation: it was now directly implicated in the field of politics.

A New Species of Man:

The Man of Feeling

Jina Politi

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Ben Jonson's grotesque portrait of the enthusiast, which at the time was further elaborated in philosophical, medical and religious writings, proved, however, totally unsuccessful in harnessing this violent passion which was gripping the lower orders in English society during the seventeenth century. The radical sects, inspired by the voice of God and by the teachings of the 'Great Leveller' (Christ), contested all institutions in operation at the time: they rejected the religious doctrine of sin, preached sexual liberation and women's emancipation; campaigned for the freedom of speech and the abolition of rank and private property. The millenarian spirit ran high in those days. The Fifth Monarchists prophesied Christ's imminent second coming, which would establish equality, love and justice in *this* world. The enthusiasts held that 'salvation' was not meant to be a heavenly deliverance of the soul but an earthly liberation of the poor man's body. Hence, the message communicated by the godly voice to these fighters of liberty was to rise up and destroy all hindrances to popular rule. Thus, in spite of all ideological and penal measures taken against the 'enthusiasts', the 'seditious' passion eventually led to a civil war, the beheading of a king and the establishment of the commonwealth.

Yet, once Oliver Cromwell had established himself as the undisputed leader of the revolutionary army, in the famous Putney Debates (October 1647) he himself turned against the "heretical democracy" of the radical sects. By 1649, he had crushed all their attempts at revolt and "it was only a matter of time before the ranks of the gentry would be reunited. Social conservatism led to conservative politics."¹ As "the revolution within the revolution failed", the collective passion of enthusiasm began to be repressed. With the death of the protector, the commonwealth as well came to its appointed end. Christ's second coming had been indefinitely postponed by history as the miracle of resurrected kingship was to determine the future course of time.

The traumatic moment marking the repression of the collective passion of 'enthusiasm' dates from the restoration of monarchy in England in 1660. For over a century, what follows this repression is a fascinating ideological process of discursive sublimations aiming at the transformation of this and all other unbridled passions into the higher, soft passions appropriate for a civilised society. "The progress of society" and the grand narrative attendant to its ascending "stages" entailed a reformation in the code of manners as well. Thus, the idea of progress, the foundation of which lay on the anthropological opposition of *civilised/uncivilised*, brought about a significant revision in the taxonomy of human passions: whereas in older philosophical and other treatises "passions" had been classified horizontally in terms of antithetical pairs, they were now arranged vertically in accordance with their "violence" or "softness". Neutrality thus gave way to evaluation and this evaluation reflected the order of social and racial distinctions: the lower, unruly passions were to be found in the collective body known as "the mob" and in the inferior races; the soft, civilised ones in the individual members of the genteel classes of the Western world. In short, what in the past had been designated as *the elemental passions of the human soul* now came to acquire and to reflect class and race divisions. As Adam Smith noted in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

The amiable virtue of humanity requires, surely, a sensibility much beyond what is possessed by the rude vulgar of mankind . . . The amiable virtues consist in that degree of sensibility which surprises by its exquisite and unexpected delicacy and tenderness. The awful and respectable,

*in that degree of self-command which astonishes by its amazing superiority over the most ungovernable passions of human nature.*²

"Propriety", "reserve" and "decency" were signs of civilised behaviour which controlled even "the passion by which nature unites the two sexes". Though "naturally the most furious of all the passions, all strong expressions of it are upon every occasion indecent".³ Therefore, the "strong expressions" of libidinal drives were confined to the lower orders of society and to the uncivilised, primitive races. As far as literature was concerned, this "most furious of all passions" was reserved either for the immoral "continent" as in the gothic novel, or for the profligate, aristocratic villain whose design was to loot the investments placed upon the virginity of the bourgeois maiden.

Thus, the great social and political drama which had been acted out on the British stage in the seventeenth century had, together with the rise of capitalism and colonial expansion, also announced the end of tragic, passionate man. Oliver Cromwell, a believer in the "immorality of the stage", had closed down the theatres; Charles II reopened them.⁴ Drama was now turning into melodrama and the elemental passions of the soul into "sentiments". A new species of man appeared on the social and imaginary stage to take the place of the enthusiast: *the man of feeling*.

The language of passions, a sublime, figurative language which before the eighteenth century delved for expression into the abyss of man's psyche, was also undergoing a purgation. John Dryden rewrote some of Shakespeare's plays so as to bring them closer to the three classical unities followed by the French dramatists. Shakespeare's colossal yet unruly *natural* genius should be made to conform to the esthetic rules of a higher stage of civilisation. The Royal Society's linguistic manifesto, as expounded by Bishop Sprat, illustrates most vividly this ideological turn. To quote at length:

*There is one thing more about which the society has been most solicitous; and that is the manner of their discourse: which unless they had been very watchful to keep in due temper, the whole vigour of their design, had been soon eaten by the luxury and redundancy of speech . . . this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of metaphors, this volubility of tongue, which makes so great a noise in the world. They have therefore been most rigorous in putting into execution the only remedy that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been a constant resolution to reject all the amplifications, digressions and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity and shortness when men delivered so many things almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses; a native easiness.*⁵

Thus, language was to be purged of all the "malign properties" of passion, in a manner not dissimilar to what Slavoj Žižek designates as "passion in the era of decaffeinated faith".⁶ The communicative model of inspired discourse considered the enthusiast as an empty vessel through which God transmitted his passionate message directly to his people. By the eighteenth century, God had retired to his heavenly mansions and did not meddle in human affairs. Newton's Laws had undertaken to do the job. As society progressed, telephony was to take over the function of the mediator; witness the following from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one."⁷

It is not without significance that in the late seventeenth and during the eighteenth centuries, the term "passion" was gradually being superseded by terms such as "emotion", "feeling", "sensitivity", "sentiment", the last being often accompanied in treatises by the adjective "moral". It was these "moral" sentiments which were recruited to combat and subdue the violent passions of man's soul. What is important to note here is that, for many thinkers, the "moral" quality was not an inherent attribute of the "sentiment" but a behavioural *effect* which was motivated by the individual's *interest*. Albert Hirschman shows this most conclusively in the first part of his seminal study *The Passions and the Interests* which he entitles "How interests were called in to neutralise the passions".

This new, egoistic factor, which replaced the old, fundamental antithesis of the *pleasure/pain* principle as the source of all passions, reconstituted the idea of "self" as it entailed a reassessment of human volition in its relation not only to passions but to the *body* as well. For the object of desire and the springs of action were not determined by the impulsive (e)motions of attraction and repulsion, but by mental calculations weighing the pros and cons relating to self-interest. This revision led to a profound re-evaluation of values since "values" were now entering the field of relativity. "Self-interest", the hubris which once generated tragedies such as *Dr. Faustus* and *Macbeth*, was now discovered to be the motive *par excellence* for the advancement and happiness not only of the individual but of society as well.

The philosophical enquiry concerning innate and acquired characteristics ran high in those days. One school argued that moral sentiments such as benevolence, maternal love, sympathy for the other, and the pursuit of virtue were innate in man. The other, that moral sentiments were an expedient; that maternal love was a fiction; that "virtue" was not in the least "disinterested", given the fact that even religious doctrine promised the "virtuous" *rewards* in the afterlife. Hence, the foundations of society did not rest on an innate sense of human sociability but on the basest, egotistic passions. These, paradoxically, worked for the benefit of the many. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith noted:

A revolution of the greatest importance to the public happiness was in this manner brought about by two different orders of people (the nobility and the merchants), who had not the least intention to serve the public. To gratify the most selfish vanity was the sole motive of the great proprietors. The merchants and artificers, much less ridiculous, acted merely from a view to their own interest and in pursuit of their own pedlar principle of turning a penny wherever a penny was to be got. Neither of them had either knowledge or foresight of the great revolution which the folly of the one, and the industry of the other, was gradually bringing about.⁸

Bernard Mandeville, some decades before Adam Smith, had summed it up most succinctly in *The Fable of the Bees*: "Thus every part was full of vice / Yet the whole mass a paradise."

The ideological antitheses above were not restricted to the philosophical field. They concurrently marked the discursive practices of literature profoundly and were seminal in the determination of its formal and conceptual structures. To mention just one example: in 2006 we saw in Athens a stage revival of Lessing's famous play *Sarah*. To most viewers, this was a postmodern

production which turned the eighteenth-century lachrymose melodrama into a slapstick farce. Thus, where Lessing's audiences were dissolving into uncontrollable tears, today's audiences were bursting into uncontrollable laughter. Yet, this "reversal", which supposedly aimed to foreground the radical "otherness" of a cultural past in its relation to our amoral, materialistic present, was, in historical terms, altogether deceptive. For, in my opinion, what the stage director Yannis Houvardas did was to faithfully reproduce the antithetical viewpoints which were current in Lessing's times.

Lessing had been very much influenced by the English novelist Samuel Richardson, whose novel *Clarissa* had provided the plot for *Sarah*. Richardson's first novel, *Pamela*, dealt with the same theme, namely, the machinations of a licentious noble to seduce an innocent virgin of the lower ranks. Clarissa, for reasons which do not concern us here, succumbs. On the contrary, Pamela puts up a valiant fight for the preservation of her virginity and succeeds in saving not only her virtue but also the soul of the villain, who is reformed and finally marries her. The full title of this novel read *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*. No sooner was *Pamela* acclaimed as a bestseller than Henry Fielding, another great novelist of the time, published a parody entitled *Shamela*. Needless to say that the parody demasked the virgin and presented her as a wily hypocrite who knew how to direct her "self-interest" by manipulating the other and placing an exorbitant "price" on the object of his desire. Pamela is the winner in the bargain. The servant girl finally obtains the desired title of a "Lady"! "Morality", in the final analysis, was an expedient tool in the field of social antagonisms.

With respect to *Pamela*, what proved of especial significance concerning the new paradigm on "emotions" in its relation to fiction was the crucial way in which it affected narrative structure and the discourse of subjectivity. Pamela is a first-person narrative written in the form of letters. A first-person narrative constitutes the character as both subject and object. Pamela not only undertakes to write *her own story* but also observes and tries to articulate the inner states of her psyche. What we are therefore witnessing in this novel is the inaugurating moment of the *inward turn* of narrative, a moment which was eventually to establish the *stream of consciousness* as the protagonist in fiction at the expense of plot, action and the disinterested gaze of an observing narrator. From an ideological point of view, though this "inward turn", this "interior monologue" which transformed the motion of external time into psychological "duration" and submitted the forms of external space to the subjective gaze, eventually came to signify the separation and alienation of the individual from the social *other*, at the same time it was privileging the very ideology of *other*: that of *individualism*.

The elemental passions of the soul had expressed themselves in literature through modalities of action and direct, dialogic confrontation with the passionate other. On the contrary, "sentiments" shied away from action and dialogic confrontation became an internal affair. Self communication or battling with itself was to characterise the new species of man: *the man of feeling*. The outward, dramatic exposure of the passionate state in which the whole body participated, was replaced by the occasional bodily *sign* such as the drop of a tear, a blush, or a shy smile. The language of pathos was becoming inaudible, inexpressible, repressed. The code of genteel manners and of good taste, which had come to distinguish a civilised from an uncivilised society, was now transforming society and human relations into a "text". Realism was not, as has

been claimed, a transparent “window” giving onto the vistas of “reality”. It was a narrative strategy of *interpretation* which revealed what the *social* concealed. Thus, the winner in the social game was always the one who was the best reader, the best interpreter: the man of sense and not the dupe of sensibility.

In 1771, Henry Mackenzie’s novel *The Man of Feeling* appeared. The great figure behind this novel is, of course, the novelist Laurence Sterne and his masterpiece *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767). This novel deconstructed the whole edifice of the traditional narrative structures: there is no actantial model, no plot development, no sequential series of events. There are only “opinions” and these trace the intricate adventures of the mind and of language which struggles to express them. It is said that Laurence Sterne was the one who coined the word “sentimentality”. In a passionless age where “reason” condemned each mind to be an isolated, self-enclosed “island”, “feeling” was the only outlet to bring the community of men together. Sterne introduced into literature the modern Quixote: the *sentimental man* who was to father in time Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*.

In one of his *Sermons*, Laurence Sterne, who was a clergyman, wrote the following:

That a man is altogether a bubble to himself . . . and that after all that can be said in this behalf, the truest definition that can be given of him is this that he is a selfish animal; and that all his actions have so strong a tincture of that character, as to show . . . that in fact, he lives only to himself . . . there is scarce any thing which has done more disservice to social virtue, than the frequent representations of human nature, under this hideous picture of deformity, which by leaving out all that is generous and friendly in the heart of man, has sunk him below the level of a brute, as if he was a composition of all that was meanspirited and selfish.⁹

Within three years of Sterne’s death, *The Man of Feeling* appeared. It has been said that the book should have been printed on blotting paper to absorb the reader’s tears. It was an immediate success and initiated the vogue of “sentimentality” as the surest sign of the superiority of a person. At a time when capitalism was starting to show its most barbaric, inhuman aspect, the expression of “philanthropy” and of “fellow feeling” served as the ideological smokescreen for the civilised, “genteel” classes.

The Man of Feeling consists of scattered chapters and fragments found accidentally and put together by an editor. “Sentiments” and the logic of “plot” appear here as irreconcilable categories, for it is *impressions* associated by contiguity and not by causality which determine the muddled structure of this narrative. David Hartley’s associationist system, as expounded in the *Observations on Man* (1749), proved seminal for this “inward turn of narrative” and for the importance placed on “feelings”. Hartley observed that the association of ideas depended to a greater degree on the recurrence of resembling states of feeling than on the train of ideas. Feeling, which was related to the five senses, was also the motor relating ideas. Thus, a particular feeling would cause ideas associated with it to arise and exclude others. Feeling played a powerful role in memory and imagination. Unlike Hume, who looked “within” and could find no “self”, Hartley looked at feelings and located there, though indirectly, the sense of *self*.

The emphasis on feelings and the “inner state” created a space of privacy and security, secrecy and silence in the novel. Voice gave way to psychic gesture. One could argue that metonymically this “enclosure” in fiction reflected the binary, ideological opposition which was being constituted at the time: that of *private* versus *public*. Mackenzie’s hero, Harley, is the prototype in fiction of the passive, tearful humanitarian who combats through his tender, philanthropic feelings the injustices and abuses of the “heartless” social system. This emotive, critical confrontation with the social, however, locks the sentimentalist into a paradox as it is thanks to this inhuman social system that the pleasure of harbouring such noble feelings arises in his heart. Hence, the system had better remain intact!

On approaching his death, Harley confesses to his friend Charles:

This world, my dear Charles, was a scene in which I never much delighted. I was not formed for the bustle of the busy, nor the dissipation of the gay . . . It was a scene of dissimulation, of restraint, of disappointment . . . There are some feelings which perhaps are too tender to be suffered by the world. The world is in general selfish, interested, and unthinking, and throws the imputation of romance and melancholy on every temper more susceptible than its own . . . but there may be some better modifications of them in heaven, which may deserve the name of virtues.¹⁰

The Man of Feeling may be seen as symbolic of the demarcation which was, at that time, splitting the social into two spheres: the sphere of culture, to which the man of feeling was relegated, and the sphere of action which was reserved for the man of practical affairs. Politicians, as is still the case, assumed the values of the one to further the interests of the other. Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters upon the Aesthetical Education of Man* (1795) was to provide the theoretical justification for this determinative division. According to Schiller, it was a vain illusion to expect that social and political struggle could ever achieve the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality. It was only in the sphere of culture that the possibilities were provided for the “slave” to be transformed into a “free citizen” and there enjoy the same rights as his master. The Victorian Matthew Arnold was to further elaborate this thesis in his famous *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) by stressing the significance of the “inner process” through which the cultured individual would arrive at a harmonious perfection of his total personality and, consequently, to the beneficial transformation of the social sphere. “Culture” was the only answer to the explosive problems that harassed society. Are we perhaps witnessing, in our times, a postmodern, banal revival of this *(multi)culturalist* programme for the moral improvement of man towards the creation of a “fairer” society and world?

Meanwhile, the repressed passion of enthusiasm lay in wait. Alas, the defence mechanism was destined to collapse and the “regressive” symptoms to erupt once more in the final decades of the eighteenth century. The outbreak of the French Revolution announced “the return of the repressed”, which threatened to destroy all the achievements of progress, of refined culture, soft sentiments and taste. The guns, real and ideological, of the terrified ruling classes were once more turned against the new, monstrous breed of “enthusiasts”.

Edmund Burke in his famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, commenting on the Sermon of the Jacobin Bishop Richard Price, stated:

A very extraordinary miscellaneous sermon . . . mixed up in a sort of porridge of various political opinions and reflections: but the revolution in France is the grand ingredient in the cauldron . . . For my part, I looked on that sermon as the public declaration of a man much connected with literary cabbalers and intriguing philosophers; with political theologians, and theological politicians, both at home and abroad. I know they set him up as a sort of oracle . . . because he chants his prophetic song in exact unison with their designs. That sermon is in a strain which I believe has not been heard in this kingdom, in any of the pulpits . . . since the year 1648.¹¹

Price's Sermon concluded with the following "inspired" apostrophe: "Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! Take warning all supporters of slavish governments and slavish hierarchies! . . . You cannot now hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality. Restore to mankind their rights; and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together."¹² Radicalism was once more raising its terrifying stature in Britain. The "enthusiasts" declaimed that a new age of liberty was dawning which, this time, was not dependent on Christ's second coming but on their own persistent, collective struggles. Radical organisations soon spread all over the kingdom.

Burke and the Anti-Jacobins, philosophers, politicians and church authorities were all unsuccessful in containing this *inherited* enthusiastic passion, which had been kept down since 1660 but was now resurfacing to lead the British working class in its struggles against the capitalist system. Here, I especially wish to stress the word "inherited", since the metaphor of a "national inheritance" was crucial in the formation of Burke's theory of social change: a gradualist, organic process which admitted no violent breaks. It was a theory, however, which could only stand on its feet thanks to the principles of selection and exclusion as to what constituted a people's "inheritance".

Edmund Burke, fearing that the return of the repressed would lead to the loss of the "old fundamental principles" such as the spirit of nobility, religion and noble sentiments, exclaimed, "Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a *swinish multitude* . . . As things now stand, with everything respectable destroyed without us, and an attempt to destroy within us every principle of respect, one is almost forced to apologise for harbouring the common feelings of men."¹³ Literature, however, was to prove more wily than the august institutions before "the signs of the times" and the necessity for the formulation of new ideological strategies in the service of system. Soon, next to the man of feeling, the working-class subject was to appear on the scene of fiction. But this is another narrative which concerns the further adventures in history of the inextinguishable, collective passion known as "enthusiasm" in its confrontation with the high and mighty.

NOTES

- 1 Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603–1714*, Aylesbury: Abacus, 1978, pp. 118–121.
- 2 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Pt I, Sec. I, Chap. V, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 28.
- 3 *Ibid.*, Pt I, Sec. II, Chap. I, p. 33.
- 4 On the occasion of the first play to be produced in London after the re-opening of the theatres, the following couplets were addressed to the king: Greatest of Monarchs! Welcome to this place / Which Majesty was so oft wont to grace / Before our exile, to divert the Court / And balance weighty cares with harmless sport. / This truth we can to our advantage say / That they would have *no king* would have *no play*. (Italics mine)
- 5 Thomas Sprat, *A History of the Royal Society*, 2nd ed. (1702) p. 111ff.
- 6 See: Slavoj Žižek, “La Passion a l’ère de la croyance décaféiné”, in idem, *La subjectivité à venir*, Castelnau-le-Lez: Climats, 2004.
- 7 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, p. 46.
- 8 Quoted in Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985, p. 24.
- 9 Laurence Sterne, “The Vindication of Human Nature”, in idem, *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, 1760, Vol. II, p. 21.
- 10 Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, New York: Norton, 1958, pp. 90–91.
- 11 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1979), pp. 93–94.
- 12 Richard Price, “A Discourse on the Love of our Country”, quoted in Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, p. 32.
- 13 Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 173–175 (emphasis mine).