



# Exploring Text and Emotions

**Edited by Lars Sætre,  
Patrizia Lombardo,  
and Julien Zanetta**

**Aarhus University Press**



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*Exploring Text and Emotions*

Acta Jutlandica. Humanities Series 2014/13

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Cover design: Jørgen Sparre

Cover illustration: Trent Parke: "AUSTRALIA. Sydney. An office worker in Pitt Street Mall reads a book in the lunch hour", 1999; black and white photograph. From the series "AUSTRALIA. Sydney. Dream/Life and Beyond", 1999.

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Ebook production: Narayana Press, Gylling

ISSN 0065-1354 (Acta Jutlandica)

ISSN 0901-0556 (Humanities Series 13)

ISBN 978 87 7124 386 4

Aarhus University Press

Langelandsgade 177

8200 Aarhus N

Denmark

[www.unipress.dk](http://www.unipress.dk)

International distributors:

Gazelle Book Services Ltd.

White Cross Mills

Hightown, Lancaster, LA1 4XS

United Kingdom

[www.gazellebookservices.co.uk](http://www.gazellebookservices.co.uk)

ISD

70 Enterprise Drive

Bristol, CT 06010

USA

[www.isdistribution.com](http://www.isdistribution.com)

Published with the financial support of the University of Bergen, The Research Council of Norway, the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Bergen, the Lauritz Meltzer Fund, and the Centre de coopération franco-norvégienne en sciences sociales et humaines (Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme), Paris.

**In memory of  
Atle Kittang**





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# Text and Emotions

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Lars Sætre, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN;  
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The present volume is the second publication generated by the Project “Text, Action and Space”.<sup>1</sup> The first volume, *Exploring Textual Action* (2010), focused on textual action and

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1 “Text, Action and Space (TAS)” was initiated by Lars Sætre and the late Atle Kittang († 2013) at the University of Bergen in 2006, with Sætre as project leader. Together with Sætre and Kittang, Patrizia Lombardo (University of Geneva, and Swiss National Center of Competence in Research in Affective Sciences) and Svend Erik Larsen (Aarhus University) have been TAS’ leadership group from the outset. For this second volume, Ragnhild Evang Reinton (University of Oslo) and Julien Zanetta (University of Geneva, and Swiss National Center of Competence in Research in Affective Sciences) have served as additional members of the editorial group. TAS consists of scholars from Norway, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia and the United States, and represents a plethora of disciplines in the humanities: comparative literature, Scandinavian, Anglo-American, Germanic, Italian, Austrian and French literary studies, theatre studies, dramaturgy, and film studies. For the general foundation of the project, see the preface and the articles in TAS’ first volume: Sætre, Lombardo and Gullestad (eds.): *Exploring Textual Action*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010.

performativity and their spatial implications. This volume aspires to contribute to the investigation of emotions and their interaction with the dynamics of textuality and spatiality, showing the essential role of literature and the arts in the understanding of affective phenomena, such as emotions, feelings, sentiments, dispositions and moods. All the articles are explorative in the sense that they work with concrete texts and other art works. As in the first volume, those with greater emphasis on the conceptual aspects are united in the section “Elaborations”, while the contributions with a stronger analytical perspective can be found under the heading “Explorations”.

Works in literature and in the arts are *texts* in the general sense of the term, that is to say readable and interpretable objects. They represent, express or suggest affective phenomena either via direct description – verbal or visual – or in an indirect way, by allusions or effects of various types, such as the treatment of space, time, angles of vision, perspectives, and stylistic means. The novel, poetry, drama, painting and film offer what can be called a rich account of emotions. In fact, characters and narrators as well as landscapes and objects show emotions in the acute manifestation of an episode or an action (internal or external) as much as in the development of affects through time. The arts also operate upon our minds or, more precisely, they display what we in *Exploring Textual Action* established as performative power, via performative language indeed, but also thanks to the emotion or the emotions they suscite in us. Emotions have what psychologists call action tendency, which means that they solicit our response either in the external or in the internal world, in gestures or in thoughts, in the body or in the mind, or more precisely in the amalgam that is the body *and* the mind. If I am afraid, for example, my heart will beat and I will try to protect myself from the danger I

perceive, or perhaps I will turn completely frozen by it. If I feel nostalgia for something, I will react either by being sad for my loss, or by contemplating more joyful aspects of life. If I feel rage for an abuse, I may be drawn to political consciousness or commitment.

We are convinced that it is important today that criticism reflects on the affective dimension of literature and the arts. The consequences of art's affective dimension are of great interest both for ethics and aesthetics; actually, they can show the interconnection of the two spheres and therefore also the cultural interaction between them. Emotions are in fact tied to human values, and values to emotions. How could we, for instance, feel indignation for a social or moral injustice if we were not to value justice? In the arts there is interplay between the emotions they represent, express and suggest, and those triggered by them in us, the readers or spectators. The arts offer axiological knowledge, a type of cognition linked to two kinds of values: those circulating in the world – moral and political values – and those corresponding to aesthetic categories, such as the tragic, comic, sublime, beautiful, ugly, kitsch, etc. The aesthetic experience consists of movements in both directions between the two types and levels of emotions just described.

Since the 1970s, literary and art theories have been dominated first by formalist and then by cultural-studies approaches often disregarding the importance of aesthetic values and the ethical and cognitive dimensions of literature and the arts. In the last decades, the most refined structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodern literary critics have concentrated their analyses on the problem of meaning and on the construction of discourse. Paradoxically, they have avoided confronting what is fundamental in literature and in art – in their various traditional and new forms or media: both their intrinsic value as literature or art, and their ability to

represent, express and foster human sentiments, actions and beliefs, as well as their impact on us. This avoidance should in part be understood as a healthy rejection of the old literary psychology and the old literary history that explained the meaning and effect of art works by the biography of the author. The poststructuralist and postmodern mistrust of the very idea and the term of mimetic representation indicated a refusal of the passivity implicit in the term: works of art cannot be reduced to the mere mirroring of the world.

In the study of affectivity, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical approaches have stressed instincts and drives, and put a particular emphasis on a few emotional states: anguish, depression, melancholia and mourning. However, our affective life is rich and multifaceted, and – as we know from the simplest experiences of readers and spectators and from numerous works of art – there are many more emotions than those canonical psychoanalytic affective states. Often the interior space has been emphasised at the expense of the relation between exterior and interior spaces; in order to avoid this drawback we pay attention in this volume, as we did in the previous one, to the way in which space is treated in the texts we examine. The role of perception cannot be dismissed, since our senses are immediately connected to our mind, to the body-mind mix already mentioned. Literature and the arts express essential questions for human beings and their interactions: affects are at stake in every aspect of personal and social life, and our study of several different texts includes their emotional framework and their effect upon us.

Therefore, after the so-called linguistic turn, the present research aims at integrating, within literary and arts studies, the affective turn that has influenced several disciplines since the 1980s. In fact, many disciplines – from economics to political science, philosophy, psychology, history, law, biology

and the neurosciences – have taken an affective turn. The study of emotions which seemed experimentally impossible for disciplines like psychology and the cognitive sciences has now entered their agenda. The great variety of affective phenomena has been the object of many definitions, investigations, hypotheses and tests. For instance, brain-imaging experiments are now commonly undertaken. Topics which have always been common in novels, dramas and films – love, ambition, jealousy, rage, regret, remorse, resentment, trust, nostalgia, disgust and fear – have come to figure in many fields of knowledge. Literary and art criticism should not leave to the experimental sciences the prerogative of theorising those topics. Indeed, literary research can enhance the study of emotions showing that there are writers and artists who, consciously or unconsciously, have outlined theories of emotions with a more compelling grasp of their complexities than the more conceptually ambitious sciences. Writers can be considered as true thinkers of emotions in their theoretical, essayistic and narrative works alike – such as Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, William Hazlitt, Jane Austen, Flaubert, Marcel Proust, and Robert Musil. An important target of this volume is to highlight the theoretical impact of writers and their experiments with the complexity of emotions.

\* \* \*

The new direction of research into the emotions in the late 1970s and in the 1980s was initiated by some seminal works. We will only list a few, indicating the main trends, but the contributions to this volume will include a more extensive range of works. Albert Hirschman, a true pioneer, in his *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (1977), broke with the

habits of political science and economics by considering the role of human passions in the making of the modern market economy. Jon Elster's *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (1983) showed that the presence of emotions in politics and economics had too often been neglected: he used examples taken from Stendhal, and later, in his *Alchemistries of the Mind. Rationality and the Emotions* (1999), he took examples from 17th-century French moralists. In 1988 the economist Robert Frank, in his *Passions within Reason. The Strategic Role of Emotions*, challenged the quantitative and purely cognitivist strand of decision theory: his book launched the provocative thesis that emotions are essential in decision-making, and that often decisions which seem irrational manage to combine both self-interest and social cooperation.

The contribution of analytical philosophy to the study of emotions has been crucial. Just to mention two references: William Lyons, for example, investigated in his *Emotion* (1980) the nature of emotions and the evaluative process inherent in them. He took love as a model, with its many manifestations, and not the basic emotion of fear, typically used as a model in psychology. Ronald de Sousa, in his groundbreaking book *The Rationality of Emotion* (1987), discussed the interplay between reason and affect, showing that emotions have motives, cognitive substance and formal objects, a perspective which later, and with a historical concern, was developed by Martha Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001).

The historical awareness is crucial. In Western thought, the problem of affects goes back to ancient philosophy. The discrepant positions of Plato and Aristotle paved the way for the great divide that continued until Kant and the Romantics. The emotions have been considered as opposed to reason – either dangerous, as in the Kantian contrast between



the soul (*Seele*) and the intellect (*Vernunft*), or liberating as in the Romantic cult of sentiment. But another approach, expanding the Aristotelian perspective, has theorised that emotions are connected to our judgements, values, actions and beliefs.

Plato, in *The Republic*, condemned the poet as dangerous for society. The songs that were read aloud to the soldiers and moved them had, in his opinion, a negative effect: the pity and the tenderness elicited by those poems put in jeopardy their courage in military activity. In *Phaedrus*, the allegory of the chariot exemplified the three parts of the soul: the charioteer (reason) drives a chariot pulled in two different directions by two horses, one white (the will, the noble, “spirited” part of the soul), the other black (desire, the appetitive part filled with the obscure, irrational and unruly passions). Aristotle, on the other hand, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, acknowledged the role of emotions in different virtues and their relation to practical and ethical knowledge. In his *Rhetoric* he presented the connections between emotions and evaluations. Much recent work devoted to the study of affects develops Aristotle’s definition:

The emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgements, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries. And each of them must be divided under three heads; for instance, in regard to anger, the disposition of mind which makes men angry, the persons with whom they are usually angry, and the occasions which give rise to anger. (Aristotle 1990; *Rhetoric*, Book 2)

These few lines pinpoint several important issues: the role of emotions in the formation of opinion, the difference between emotion and disposition, the fact that emotions have an object and that there are internal and external circumstances (“oc-

casions”) bringing out an emotion. The Aristotelian, positive view of emotions was coupled with his approval of the value of art and the emotions it can elicit, such as pity and terror; whatever catharsis might be, it is considered as a positive effect of tragedy on the mind of spectators.

What could be more different than this theory from Kant’s sombre condemnation in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798):

Emotion is like an intoxicant which one has to sleep off, although it is still followed by a headache; but passion is looked upon as an illness having resulted from swallowing poison, or a handicap which requires an inner or an outer physician for the soul, one who knows how to prescribe cures that are generally not radical, but almost always of a palliative nature. (Kant 1996: 157)<sup>2</sup>

Many Romantics, in opposition to the primacy of reason advocated by a large part of 18th-century culture, distrusted reason; and probably some traces of that tradition are to be found in the scorn for *logos* expressed by deconstructionist literary theory. The Romantic veneration of the heart was symptomatic of a curious cultural ambivalence: philosophically, the Romantics were inspired by Kant, who dismissed passions and emotions as pathological (with the exception of one emotion: respect), but literarily and poetically they were enthralled by sentiment. Contemporary work on emotions by analytic philosophers, political scientists and economists also contests the condemnation of affects as intoxication

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2 “[Der Affekt] ist wie ein Rausch, den man ausschläft, obgleich Kopfweh darauf folgt, die Leidenschaft aber wie eine Krankheit aus verschlucktem Gift oder Verkrüppelung anzusehen, die einen inneren oder äußeren Seelenarzt bedarf, der doch mehrenteils keine radikale, sondern fast immer nur palliativ-heilende Mittel zu verschreiben weiß.” (Kant 1912: 185)

and illness, and opposes the dark dualistic vision of an eternal war between reason and the emotions. Nevertheless, if Kant's anthropology and ethics put forward a negative vision of emotions, his aesthetics paved the way to the emotional apprehension of nature and of works of art. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), and especially in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime, elaborating on the division established by Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). But above all, the 18th-century thinkers who were concerned with aesthetics broke with a normative understanding of beauty: the thing that they were interested in investigating was not the characteristics of a beautiful object, but the subjective relation with the experience of beauty and its variations according to epochs and cultures.

Modern, postmodern and deconstructionist literary critics, such as Paul de Man, have been deeply attracted to Kant's notion of the sublime (sometimes forgetting the importance of Burke's). As it appears in several articles in this volume, the analysis of the sublime has been and continues to be a major tool to discuss our perception and understanding of works of art. And in our evaluation of the importance of popular art – or of any forms that challenge canonical art – we are still indebted to the Romantics who, like Victor Hugo in his 1827 Preface to his drama *Cromwell*, enlarged the span of the sublime from the tragic to the grotesque.

Already in the first half of the 20th century, the philosopher of language Gilbert Ryle, with his *The Concept of Mind* (1949), tried to overcome the dualism of the body and the intelligence typical of the Cartesian tradition. Not surprisingly, his reflections on the interpenetration of the mind, the body and feeling were often inspired by artistic works, for

example, by Auguste Rodin's famous sculpture *Le Penseur* (*The Thinker*, 1902; see Ryle 1971a). He greatly admired Jane Austen, and discovered that she frequently used the term 'mind' "to stand not just for intellect or intelligence but for the whole complex unity of a conscious, thinking, feeling and acting person" (Ryle 1971b: 291).

But most importantly for us, at the beginning of the 20th century philosophers and psychologists like William James and writers like Marcel Proust and Robert Musil reoriented our understanding of emotions. Together with the German philosopher Max Scheler, Musil in particular shows the sophisticated role that literature played in this process. He disputed the Kantian tradition, and admitted the blending of sentiment and reason: he suggested that the adjective sentimental should be written *senti-mental*. Musil's theses about affective phenomena can be extracted from several of his essays, in his journal, and in the chapters of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*), where Agathe finds some pages written by her brother Ulrich on the psychology of the emotions. Ulrich's vision is close to that of the contemporary philosophy and psychology of emotions in their most general assumptions.

The protagonist's unfinished treatise echoes Musil's convictions, which can be summarised in a few points. Above all, the emotions are simultaneously a state and a process, inseparable from a constant modification, and nevertheless identifiable. Ulrich writes that there are nuances of anger, for example, and that anger undergoes a continuous transformation, but in spite of their never-ending metamorphosis emotions can be singled out and differentiated: one cannot confuse anger with fatigue, or sadness with pride. Ulrich argues that there are an infinite number and nuances of emotions; Musil wrote in his journal around 1929: "Sighing, smiling, laughing – they all imply innumerable variants; but we can translate them

only by using adverbs: in a resigned, ambiguous, scornful, negligent, gay, amused, cordial way” (Musil 1976: 749; our transl.).<sup>3</sup>

The question if there are innumerable emotions or just a few primary emotions and how they cluster has been debated in contemporary psychology, and had already been developed in Hume’s critique of Descartes. Hume in fact corrected some of the assumptions Descartes put forward a century before in his study of passions from 1649, *The Passions of the Soul*. For Descartes there are a few elementary passions making up all the others. He divided them into the calm and the violent passions. The calm passions are described as “reflective pleasures and pains”, and the violent passions are seen as either direct or indirect (desire, aversion, joy, grief, hope and fear are direct; love, hate, pride and humility are indirect). Hume, in the second book of his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), dedicated to passions, argued against the description of emotion as a static state and tried out dynamic definitions of emotions – or passions, to use the old term, which encompassed several affective phenomena that are today described in another vocabulary (“passions” refer to lasting dispositions, “emotions” to transitory episodes). Against Descartes, Hume maintained that it is impossible and unnecessary to define the nature or the substance of each passion, and preferred to investigate the multiple and contradictory circumstances in which passions arise. For him, as for Musil and several contemporary theorists, human affective life undergoes continuous metamorphosis. The mobility of emotions seemed to him more important than their function

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3 “Seufzen, Lächeln, Lachen – haben unzählige Arten, wir können sie aber nur durch Adverbien ausdrücken: resigniert, zweideutig, geringschätzig, nachlässig, fröhlich, belustigt, verbindlich.” (Musil 1976: 749)

or nature; in *A Dissertation on the Passions, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (posthumous edition 1777), he showed, for example, how sorrow and deception ascend to rage, rage gives rise to envy, envy to malevolence, and how malevolence revives sorrow.

In the psychological debate of the early 1970s, Paul Ekman continued most of the hypotheses from Charles Darwin's fundamental book in the history of the study of emotions, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). For Ekman, too, emotions are above all functional for the species, and he distinguishes six basic emotions that require specific behaviour and reaction: fear, rage, joy, sadness, disgust, and surprise (Ekman 1971, 1975, 1992). But in the 1980s, the psychologists Nico Frijda and Klaus Scherer broke with the functionalist approach and stressed the fact that the emotions evaluate situations and are motivated. Emotions are therefore virtually infinite in number and in intensity, and types of evaluation or *appraisal profiles* correspond to models of responses, or *response patterning* (Frijda 1986; Scherer 2004 and 2005). These appraisal-directed researches in contemporary psychology are of course distant from the early psychological theory of emotions by William James and Carl Lange in the 19th century (James 1890). The so-called James-Lange theory stressed the role of feeling and of physical arousal, and, for the two pioneer psychologists, the emotions are caused by the physiological changes produced by the stimulus: for instance, we feel sad because we cry.

In the chapters on the nature and formation of sentiment mentioned above, Robert Musil implicitly criticised the theories of emotions that are confined to the causal role of arousal, and paved the way for the evaluation or appraisal theories. For Musil, stimuli can be external and internal, and continuously circulate, since the emotions for him are taken in a web of relations, transformations, motivations and evaluations.

He insisted on the interplay of the physical and the mental, resisting both the sensualist and the idealist perspectives. The way, for example, in which Musil used the term *Geist* (spirit), which is so charged with German idealism, indicated the interpenetration of the emotions and the intellect. Writing to his friend and editor Adolf Frisé, he explained the major implications of *The Man without Qualities*: showing that sentiment and reason are not enemies but friends, he developed one side – often forgotten – of Romanticism:

The sense in which I use the word *Geist* in my book consists of both intellect and sentiment and their reciprocal interpenetration. [...] And in order to conclude, I must repeat once again that the intellect is not the enemy of sentiment [...] but its brother, even if they as siblings are usually distant. The concept senti-mental in the good sense of the Romantics once combined the two components in their unity (Musil 1981: 494-495; our transl.).<sup>4</sup>

Before the Romantic cult of sentiment produced its separation from reason leading to the exaggeration of sentimentality, 17th- and 18th-century Irish, Scottish and English philosophers – Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury; Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Edmund Burke, Adam Smith and Thomas Reid – conducted a debate about passions, sensibility and taste which in many respects anticipates the contemporary affective turn. They reflected upon the way in which human beings like and dislike various things, feel

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4 “Der Sinn, in dem ich in dem Buche das Wort Geist gebrauche, besteht aus Verstand, Gefühl und ihrer gegenseitigen Durchdringung. [...] Und ich möchte zum Schluss noch einmal wiederholen, dass der Intellekt nicht der Feind des Gefühls ist [...] sondern der Bruder, wenn auch gewöhnlich der entfremdete. Der Begriff senti-mental im guten Sinn der Romantiker hat beide Bestandteile schon einmal in ihrer Vereinigung umfasst.” (Musil 1981: 494-495)