

CHAPTER ONE

Meaning and Ambiguity

Emotions: Signals of What is Vital



Elizabeth Barrett Browning, photo about 1850, after her marriage to Robert Browning. Source: US Library of Congress.

Persisting Preoccupations

Here, from some 150 years ago, are the first lines of a famous poem.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach...¹

Elizabeth Barrett wrote the famous opening lines of this sonnet when she was 39. She had been an invalid for the previous seven years, the result of a broken blood vessel. Robert Browning wrote to her in January 1845, in admiration of her highly regarded *Poems* published a year earlier. In May he came to visit, and met her.

Elizabeth lived in London, in the house of her father, who had forbidden her to marry. For more than a year Elizabeth and Robert exchanged clandestine letters. At first she refused his proposals of marriage, thinking he would not need an invalid wife. But her health steadily improved, and the couple did marry – secretly – in St Marylebone Church in September 1846. A week later, Elizabeth left her father's house, never to return. The Brownings went to live in Italy, where they had 15 happy years together. Elizabeth's father never forgave her. He returned all her entreating letters unopened.

Towards the end of her sonnet, which probably was composed in 1846, Elizabeth writes: "I love thee with a passion put to use / In my old griefs..." These griefs included the death of a much loved brother, Edward, who drowned while sailing.

Love is an emotion with an individual history of coming to know another person. Of all the events that ordinarily happen to ordinary people, in the West at least, falling in love has the most momentous effects. It is a hinge on which an individual history can turn. It is often the occasion for finally leaving the parental home, for making a commitment for life to another person, for taking on new responsibilities, enclosing that person within the circle of self so that his or her welfare becomes as important as one's own. Elizabeth Barrett's poem and her own love story have helped us to understand it better.

Love is an emotion that has a history in the evolution of human beings, in each individual, and in the development of Western culture. It is an emotion that helps to define who we human beings are. "Some people," said La Rochefoucauld, "would never have fallen in love if they had never heard of love."² This

may be an understatement. Without stories of falling in love and of being in love in the modern Western sense, we might not know how to conduct this important emotion.

What is an Emotion?

Love is an example of an emotion, but what is an emotion?³ This question was asked by William James, father of American psychology, in 1884.⁴ The answer around which this book is based was proposed nearly two and a half millennia ago in Greece, and is today widely accepted. It is that emotions are most typically caused by evaluations – psychologists also call them appraisals⁵ – of events in relation to what is important to us: our goals, our concerns, our aspirations.

Emotions may include bodily changes such as a glow and smile of happiness, the pounding heart of anxiety, the clenched fist of anger. Indeed, William James argued that an emotion *is* the perception of any such bodily change.⁶ The common idea that when we see a bear in the woods, we are frightened and therefore run is quite wrong, said James. We see the bear and run. The fear is the perception of our body arousing itself for the emergency and moving to escape. Although the evidence to support the order of events that James postulated is somewhat equivocal, most modern theorists accept that emotions involve both mind and body.

The term “emotion” covers a wide range of phenomena. To denote this range some writers have revived the terms “affect” and “affective,” which had been used in English in the early seventeenth century.⁷ More commonly nowadays, however, the terms “emotion” and “emotional” are used to denote this range.

The kind of emotion that is most commonly experienced occurs somewhat suddenly. We feel suddenly happy when, at the airport, we greet a friend whom we’ve not seen for some time. Or we may feel anger at a slight. Such an emotion fills our consciousness. It might best be called a reactive emotion, though it’s often just called an emotion.

Emotions are based on what we know, and they include thoughts, sometimes obsessive thoughts, about what has happened or what might happen next. Emotions also often create in us urges to act in an emotional way in relation to someone

else: we might feel an urge to hug that person or to stomp out of the room. Emotions give life its urgency. They are, as Nico Frijda has said, states of immediate readiness to act.⁸ Though the smile when we first see our friend, or a frown of anger, lasts only a few seconds, the thoughts of an emotion, the tone of feeling happy, angry, or whatever it may be, and the urge to act, may last for minutes or hours.

The family of emotional phenomena includes yet longer lasting processes that may best be called moods, such as cheerfulness, irritability, or sadness, which may persist for hours or days. Unlike reactive emotions, which usually have causes that are obvious to us, moods can be of uncertain provenance.

What one may call sentiments – the term was once more common than now – last even longer. Love of the kind Elizabeth Barrett wrote about, or distrust of a kind that we may feel towards someone whom we experience as acting only for his or her own ends, are sentiments: long-lasting emotional states of relating to other people. They can form the central bases of a relationship over many years.

Preference is another term in the emotion family: one may think of it as a silent emotion waiting for an opportunity to express itself in a choice we make.

Are there different kinds of emotion? I believe there are. We experience both anger and sadness as negative, but they are distinct.⁹ Friendly affection is distinct, too. It is perhaps our most human emotion: the most recently evolved, perhaps the most fragile. It contributes to the scripts of love, cooperation, and kindness. Without it, the human world as we know it would not exist.

The Workings of Emotions

Let us move now from what emotions are to how they work, keeping in mind both reactive emotions and longer lasting sentiments. Reactive emotions occur when the appearance of the world as we assume it to be¹⁰ is pierced by reality. In our assumed world, objects and people take on the colors of our understandings, of our hopes, of our desires, of our likes and dislikes. A reactive emotion occurs with the unexpected; it is a meeting of what we assumed with what we did not assume.

Whilst living a life of solitude, we meet someone who stirs us. Or, without in any way expecting it, an acquaintance surprises us with an act of great generosity. The world suddenly intrudes through the layers of our assumptions.

Of what is our assumed world composed? The shape is of what is there: the trees, our friends, our colleagues at work. But each of the objects and people we see is also made from how we construct it. As Hippolite Taine said:

So our ordinary perception is an inward dream which happens to correspond to things outside; and, instead of saying that a hallucination is a perception that is false, we must say that perception is a *hallucination that is of the truth*.¹¹

We know from dreams that our brains have the machinery to make scenes that we experience. So eyes are not windows that let in aspects of the world. Instead they pick up clues to enable us to construct the world as we experience it. The clues are used, along with our assumed and implicit knowledge of the way the world works, to construct what we perceive.

Reactive emotions are caused when something in the assumed world unexpectedly affects a concern. Sometimes the unexpected is delightful, and we have the sense of new possibilities. Sometimes the unexpected is painful: in anger, for instance, the world narrows to plans of how we might confront the offender with the offense.

We can think of reactive emotions and sentiments respectively as like the two kinds of neural signal by which our muscles work: phasic signals move a limb; the signals of muscle tone hold the limb steadily in place. Comparably, a reactive emotion causes a change whereas a sentiment maintains an emotional attitude. Think of both, in the way suggested by Michel Aubé, as commitments.¹² In the understanding of emotions, the idea of commitment is as important as the ideas of evaluation and readiness. Commitments are the bases of our relationships. So a reactive emotion is typically a change of commitment, and a sentiment is a maintained commitment. Falling in love is a change, a commitment to a new person. Love is a maintained commitment to a person. Anger is typically a reaction to something that has happened, and a commitment to resolving, in one way or another, the conflict that it promotes.

Emotions of both shorter and longer durations are signals to ourselves and others. Emotions are signals to ourselves that steer us towards those things we evaluate as worthwhile in our projects, away from what would be deleterious. They are signals to others, because although these others have no direct access to our inner feelings, they notice our reactive emotions and sentiments. And – constituted like us – they can infer what we may be feeling. So: as evaluations, emotions are guides, to us and to others. As commitments, they are the sinews and articulations of our relationships.

Emotions and the History of Writing

There is something problematic about our emotions. Is that why they have been at the center of stories all round the world? When we pick up a book of non-fiction we hope to be informed, but when we pick up a book of fiction, or hear a poem, or go to a play or film, we expect to be moved.

It was in the civilization of Sumer, in present-day Iraq, that writing was first invented. We in the West and the Middle East, are the direct descendants of this culture. Some 5,000 years ago the ephemeral shadows of thought first took lasting shape in writing. From this culture what do we read? We read stories of emotions. In one text written about 3,800 years ago, the goddess Inanna wants Gilgamesh in sexual union: “O lord Gilgamesh, you shall be my man, I will not let you go...” Gilgamesh rejects her, so the goddess asks her father if she may take the Bull of Heaven, with which she will avenge herself on Gilgamesh.¹³

Not long after the epic tales of Gilgamesh, stories began to be written in Africa. From the writings of the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, for instance, comes a sad story called “The dispute between a man and his *Ba* [soul],” in which the man says he is weary of life. Made angry by his complaints, his soul threatens to leave him.¹⁴ Then the man delivers four poems, the lines of which include:

To whom shall I speak today?
No-one is cheerful,
He with whom one walked is no more.

To whom shall I speak today?
I am burdened with grief
For lack of an intimate

To whom shall I speak today?
Wrong roams the earth,
And ends not.

The man's soul says he should throw his complaints on the woodpile, but agrees to stay with him.

A thousand years later, the stories of the Hebrews were written. They recount that, when God created the world and human beings, almost the first thing that happened was an emotion. Eve, and then Adam, ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. At the moment of becoming conscious, knowing good and evil, they became self-conscious, and they felt ashamed.¹⁵

Written at around the same time, the first substantial surviving fiction of the Greeks was *The Iliad*, which starts with these words: *Menin aeide, thea* – "Of rage sing, goddess." The poet invokes the muse to sing of the rage of Achilles against Agamemnon, the commander in chief of the Greek army. This very personal emotion, of the Greeks' best warrior, aroused because of a slight, nearly destroyed the Greek army.

There are writings of similar antiquity from the Asian continent. These include the *Mahabharata*, a story of family feuding that allegorizes the battle of good and evil. The heroes represent the good. They triumph, and rejoice. But they suffer a final remorse because they too have committed evil in their fight.¹⁶

In China, which has a similarly ancient written tradition, the sage Confucius wrote about emotion as long ago as the fifth century BC. Around 200 years later, his follower, Mencius, continued the theme, for example in the story of a king who asked him about the qualities needed in a ruler. The king had seen a bull shrinking in fear when about to be sacrificed. He told his attendants to spare the bull, and use a lamb instead. Mencius says that he is sure that the king had been moved by compassion at seeing the bull's distress, and that quality would be sufficient to make him a good king. The king said: "For though the deed was mine, when I looked into myself I failed to understand my

own heart. You described it for me and your words struck a chord in me."¹⁷

In the Americas, the European Conquistadors overthrew the civilizations of the Aztecs, the Incas, and the Maya in the first part of the sixteenth century. Of the indigenous groups, the Maya seem to have possessed the most literate culture, but only four pre-conquest Mayan books in their original hieroglyphic script have survived. To the intense distress of the Maya, the books were burned by the Spanish on the grounds that "they contained nothing but superstition and the devil's falsehoods."¹⁸

A few writings did survive by being transcribed into alphabetic script after the conquest, perhaps most famously the *Popol Vuh*, a Mayan Genesis.¹⁹ It tells of the gods' four experiments to make humans. On the first try, the beings had no arms, so could not work. On the second, a being was made out of mud, but not only could it not keep its shape but, being solitary, it could not reproduce. The third try was to make people out of wood. Though the resulting beings looked and talked like humans, they could not remember "The heart of the Sky" (the gods), so the gods destroyed them by means of a flood. Their remnants are the monkeys. In their fourth experiment, to make humans out of food, the gods were at last successful. Four human ancestors, androgenous "mother-fathers," were made. They did pray to their makers, but they exceeded the gods' expectations: "Perfectly they saw, perfectly they knew everything under the sky, whenever they looked."²⁰ The gods thought this was not good, because, as they put it: "their deeds would become equal to ours."²¹ Therefore the new humans were

...blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon. Their eyes were weakened. Now it was only when they looked nearby that things were clear. And such was the loss of the means of understanding, along with the means of knowing everything.²²

Descendants of ancient European civilization might be reminded of the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles – some centuries after Homer – in which humans could act but could not foresee some of the most important results of their actions. Or was the clouding of human vision a blinding by emotions?

Stories based on emotions as human universals

How, with such contrasts between love and cruelty, can the history of human emotions be anything other than problematic? The story of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning is a love story in the classical sense. Love stories are the most common kinds of stories worldwide, and stories of warring contention are the second most common.²³ In the canonical love story, two strangers meet. More or less quickly they fall in love, and they long to be together, but their union is prevented. In Elizabeth Barrett's case her father forbade the marriage.

In the happy version of such stories, the couple contend with the obstacles, and overcome them; Elizabeth's and Robert's story is of this kind, though a sad chord is heard of Elizabeth's continuing estrangement from her father. In the tragic version of such stories, some event such as death separates the lovers. In *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the most famous love stories in the West, the death of both lovers is transcended symbolically by a union between the two families whose feud had militated against the lovers' marriage.

Love itself has changed in the course of historical time. If you were to hear now of a father forbidding his 39-year-old daughter to marry, you would be shocked. You would regard the father's possessive emotions as inappropriate. He should feel – we would say – quite differently. In other words, our idea of love and even its experience in relation to parents and to partners has changed. So emotions are not fixed. They are made in part from what we know culturally, and from what we believe to be socially appropriate.

The classic story of love that meets vicissitudes continues, though with transformations. In the circle of my acquaintances in the past two years, I know of one couple in which the woman was Muslim and the man Christian. The fathers of both these people had a difficult tussle with themselves accepting their daughter's and son's union, but at the wedding each father read a piece of scripture from his tradition. Another person I know, a woman very close to her parents, told them she loved another woman. The parents could not bring themselves to speak to her for two months, and remained upset about their daughter's preference.

Why have emotions been so fascinating to writers?

Why should emotions have been so fascinating in the 5,000-year history of writing? It is because they are about our concerns. Though we tend to forget brief emotions within a few minutes, our larger emotions are markers of our most important concerns and aspirations, and we do remember them. In this way, love is momentous. It signifies the accomplishment of a longing, the possible union with just that other with whom one can become intimate. In a survey of 100,000 Americans, psychologist Jonathan Freedman found that it was not wealth, or health, or worldly success, that most people regarded as the most important ingredient of happiness. It was love in marriage.²⁴

So emotions are fascinating because the more substantial of them point to what is most important to us as human beings. Reactive emotions occur when a concern, a project, an aspiration, has fared either better or worse than we had expected. Elizabeth Barrett had resigned herself to life as a recluse. Instead she was surprised to find someone who loved her and whom she could love to the depth and breadth and height her soul could reach. Positive emotions – love, happiness, pride in accomplishment, relief – occur as signals that things are going well, or better than expected. Negative emotions – anger, fear, sadness, shame, contempt – occur when we evaluate things as going worse than we expect, when our goals and projects fail, or are frustrated, when someone behaves worse than we anticipate.

A second reason why emotions are fascinating is that they set us puzzles. Love may be wonderful to lovers, but its paradoxes include the way in which it can nullify all previous commitments. Its effects may be less than wonderful to other people. Of all the objects in our mental life, emotions are among the most mysterious. Many human emotions seem paradoxical. Their implications may reach beyond what we can easily think through.

Here is an instance from a young British woman aged 20, whom I shall call Abigail.²⁵ She kept an emotion diary at my request, looking out for, and making notes on, emotions as they occurred in her everyday life. When she gave me back the diary, I interviewed her to ask more about the incidents. One emotion was anger in an argument with her boyfriend. There seemed

nothing mysterious. She rated her anger's intensity as 7 on a scale of 0 ("not noticeable") to 10 ("the most intense I have experienced in my life"). The argument had started about preferences for different kinds of music. Initially it had lasted about two-and-a-half hours. Then its perplexing aspects began. For three nights she had recurrences of anger, which kept her awake. She said: "I just couldn't get through to him." It made her ask herself, "Is this going too far?" and "If this goes too far, it [the relationship] would end." A serious conclusion seemed to be implied by what had started as a simple matter. She said that her behavior included sarcasm, cutting remarks, and sulking. But she also made attempts at reparation. She had emotions about her emotion. She felt guilty, she said, and wondered if she was pressing her boyfriend too hard. Not only should one not have such feelings, but she was, she said, "a person who would not be irritated by someone with a different opinion." And, she said, her anger included "something that lowered [her] estimation of [herself] on some kind of internal scale." The emotion too seemed to have a history: the argument "reminded her of an ex-boyfriend" and made her "wonder if it [the relationship] was worth it." This in turn made her not like her current boyfriend, and think that he had faults. She thought she should step back and think about the incident some more, as a way of calming down. Then she thought she was partly to blame.

Abigail's anger was a signal to herself to think about her identity. It hinted at a trait that she may have had but did not like, which perhaps had caused problems earlier in her history, which had previously made it difficult to keep close to a previous boyfriend, and which was now raising a comparable problem again.

Abigail's feelings and thoughts were particular to her, but are not such sequences recognizable? When an emotion breaks through the layers of our expectations, upheavals of thought²⁶ may occur, and we may find ourselves searching for reasons and implications of what happened. Emotions can drive thoughts and ruminations in an involuntary way. They can keep us awake at night. They can distract us from other things that we are doing. They can return unwilling. In the more important matters of life, the upheaval of an emotion can become an earthquake.

The Inchoateness of Some Emotions

Although we know exactly what most reactive emotions are about, some emotions may start as vague and formless.²⁷ In a short story first published in *Vogue* magazine in 1894, the American writer Kate Chopin depicted an emotion of a woman, Louise Mallard, that started indistinctly. The story starts with her hearing that her husband has died in a train crash.²⁸ Unlike some people, who are simply benumbed by such news, she wept at once, in her sister's arms. The event was distinct, and her bereavement caused the emotion. But when the first storm of grief had subsided, Louise Mallard went to her room. She found herself looking from her window at the sky, and then she began to experience another emotion.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching towards her, through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air. Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her . . .²⁹

The emotion, when it became conscious, was a joy at the realization of her freedom. She may have loved her husband, but he also constrained her.

Emotions can point to goals and concerns. Sometimes they are clear to us. Sometimes, however, we might not know we have these goals, so the emotions associated with them emerge only slowly. Sometimes, as with Louise Mallard, concerns are hidden from us because they would be difficult to own. When such a meaning emerges from some unknown region, it tells us something. It can cause further emotions, which can open new worlds or make us question firmly held convictions.

Emotions point to matters of vital importance, and energize us in relation to them. What is most important in human life? For the most part and for most people, the answer is: other people. So emotions include love, anger, affection, shame, fear, contempt. They set our priorities, make our lives meaningful, and create our commitments to friends or against enemies. When a reactive emotion or a mood points to concerns or aspirations that we

barely recognize in ourselves, it may set us problems. The urgency it confers on these problems may act as a goad.

An emotion can be a tug on the sleeve. Sometimes it can be a violent shove, or a painful kick. It demands to be noticed, it demands to be understood. Emotions' properties as indicators of importance and as setters of problems make them the most fascinating aspects of mental life, both our own and that of those about whom we care.

Emotions and Creativity: The Era of Romanticism

If emotions can be setters of problems, in their very nature they can challenge our creativity. They fairly demand that we think anew on the unexpected event that caused them, and on its implications. Their insistence ensures that we concentrate. Not only that: many people do indeed find creative solutions to the problems that their emotions set them.³⁰

The idea of emotions as our most authentic spurs to creativity is the core of an influential theory of art, one of the best accounts of which was given by Robin Collingwood, in 1938. He said that art was not entertainment, or the craft of working with particular materials to achieve certain effects. Art is – quite simply – the expression of emotions. He did not mean expression as one might frown in anger, or smile in happiness. He did not mean simply giving a label to an emotion, for instance, “I’m rather envious of her.” What he meant was exploring an emotion in its particularity, and in detail. Imagine a man, says Collingwood:

At first he is conscious of having an emotion, but not conscious of what this emotion is. All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is: “I feel . . . I don’t know how I feel.” From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself. This is an activity which has something to do with the thing we call language: he expresses himself by speaking. It also has something to do with consciousness: the emotion expressed is the emotion of whose nature the person who feels it is no longer unconscious.³¹

The man of whom Collingwood speaks is the artist: not necessarily in the professional sense, but the artist in all of us. Expression of an emotion in this sense occurs as a person explores its meaning and implications. Expression occurs in a language, often of words, but it might be in painting, or in music. Emotions and sentiments are often latent. The meanings of Abigail's emotion emerged in the days after she had been angry at her boyfriend. In her short story, Kate Chopin depicted an emotion emerging gradually as from a mist. Often, it is by expressing them in words (including the words of conversation), images, symbols, or music that emotions take shape, so that their significance becomes clearer.

Romanticism

The theory that Collingwood expounded was the Romantic theory of art.³² The beginning of the era of Romanticism is generally dated to 1750, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote a prize-winning essay on whether the restoration of the arts and sciences at that time had contributed to the purification of morals.³³ His conclusion was no. The arts, and especially the art of manners, were artificial. He wrote that they tended therefore to obscure natural feelings, and recognition of the feelings of others; this artificial turn led to a deterioration of morals.

Romanticism was the mood of both the American and French Revolutions at the end of eighteenth century. The argument – no, the feeling – at the beginning of the Romantic period was that people are naturally sociable. Therefore society does not need, in the American case, the imposition of a colonial power thousands of miles away, or, in the French case, a monarchy to impose servitude on a populace. Rousseau wrote: “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.”

In literature there was a corresponding move away from the contrived and the artificial, towards the natural and towards a primacy of emotions, so that William Wordsworth, writing in 1802, was able to define poetry as:

The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of

contemplation, is gradually produced and does itself actually exist in the mind.³⁴

In English, there are many great novels of the early Romantic period, and they reflect a high valuation of emotions. One might read Jane Austen's *Pride and prejudice*. The title points to the importance of the emotions. The book is about Elizabeth Bennet, who at first is repelled by the arrogant manners of a certain Mr Darcy who enters her neighborhood. She gradually learns more about him, and recognizes her own prideful prejudice in her judgments both of him and of another man who had given an initially more favorable impression. The novel is a kind of anti-Hollywood love story. In Hollywood, we know how love is portrayed. Two people, typically strangers, see each other. Their eyes meet. They stare at each other for several long seconds. Snap: they are in love. Jane Austen, whose teenage writings included fierce satire on what she regarded as the silly love stories of her time, proposed a different idea: Elizabeth can only love Darcy by getting to know him, and who he is in the layers beneath his manners.

Since the beginning of Romantic period, emotions have been seen as bases for poetry, novels, music, and visual arts, which can therefore be thought of as repositories of reflections on these aspects of life that give it meaning but also cause so many of our problems.

In terms of our relations with the emotions, we are still very much in the Romantic era. The questions raised by Jane Austen's novels, for instance of the conflicts between artificiality and naturalness, and between love at first sight and knowing someone as they are, could scarcely be more contemporary. If you doubt whether we are still in the era of Romanticism, what do you make of the modern belief that life should be lived with intensity, with heart, and with style? All three are watchwords of Romanticism.

Have Emotions Changed in the Course of Historical Time?

Many historians date the beginning of the modern world to the beginning of the Renaissance, around 1300, with Dante in Florence and his masterpiece *The divine comedy*. Have emotions

changed between medieval times and modern? And have there been changes in the tenor of emotional life, even of the experience of emotions, during the 700 years of modernity? These questions have not been among the most researched within the academic discipline of history, but they have been investigated. One widely accepted idea is that in medieval times people were more expressive of emotions than now. A famous statement of the idea began Johan Huizinga's *The waning of the Middle Ages*:

To the world [at the end of the medieval period], the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. All experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life.³⁵

Another famous work was Norbert Elias's *The civilizing process*,³⁶ in which he saw powerful people in medieval times as violent and wild because they had nothing to restrain them. Then domestication began. From the twelfth century onwards, the courts of great aristocrats imposed constraints by means of the presence of noble ladies. Knights began to devote themselves, in love that was often - or at least sometimes - chaste, to ladies of high station.³⁷ "Courtesy, courtship, courtliness," are terms that derive from ideas of how to behave at court. What happened according to Elias, was that emotions that were not wild, notably shame, and institutions of wider reach than the court, notably the modern state, began to impose restraint. Continuing in the tradition of investigating changes of emotions over time, the historians Peter and Carol Stearns introduced the term "emotionalogy," and have explored in many publications the idea of how in America since the nineteenth century various unpleasant emotions have been controlled. Peter Stearns has argued that today the USA's biggest ambivalence is between increasing indulgence in hedonistic pleasures, on the one hand, and increasing efforts of repression of emotions, on the other.³⁸

Behind such ideas as those of Huizinga, Elias, and the Stearnses is a widely held piece of folk theory. Folk theory is the implicit theory we all use to explain to ourselves and to others how the world works. The piece of folk theory at issue

sees emotion as something like a liquid heated in a pot that is liable to boil over. For Huizinga and Elias, medieval emotions boiled over freely and frequently. For Peter Stearns, modern America is caught between taking the lid off and clamping it down. The idea is that with historical time, the issue of how emotions can be contained, or, to use a modern term, regulated, has come to concern both society and individuals.

William Reddy has explored how emotions are both the target and the expression of large changes in society.³⁹ He introduces the idea of what he calls emotives: forms of speech and action that bring into being what they refer to. Thus anger, or saying, "I'm completely fed up with you," is an emotive that brings into being a state of reciprocal anger in the person who is addressed. Reddy's main object of study is the French Revolution, in which the idea of generosity of all to all was proposed to replace the repressive monarchist society, and did indeed, for a short time, come into being. Reddy argues that by means of its emotives every society sets up an emotional regime, within which certain expressions, for instance respect for authority, love of God, universal benevolence, or whatever it may be, are induced and maintained.

Reddy's idea is not that law makers prescribe certain behavior which is then carried out. Rather, within a particular emotional regime, laws are made to codify the emotives of the regime. Strict regimes such as occur in totalitarian states enforce their standards rigidly, and some people's personal styles benefit from having their emotional lives tightly managed. Other more relaxed regimes enforce strictness only in sections of society such as the army. In America today, we might notice how emotives have been used to induce hostility to "terrorism." A collective fear and a collective anger have occurred, with all that these mentalities involve.⁴⁰

Other historians also started to examine changes in more intimate aspects of life. Lawrence Stone examined the huge changes that have taken place in the family in the early modern period in England.⁴¹ In 1500, for both rich and poor, death was omnipresent. Neither children nor parents were expected to live long. There was less parental investment in children. The idea of childrearing was often to break the will of a child, as a horse is broken in order to be ridden. Adult populations were produced that were both more subservient to authority and also more

paranoid than today. At the same time sexual relationships were vastly delayed as compared with those elsewhere in the world, and perhaps this resulted in the diversion of energy into work. The replacement of patriarchal marriage by companionate marriage, the appearance of privacy, the discovery of sexual pleasure by the married couple: all these began to come into their own in Europe and America only towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. At the same time, the new nuclear family enabled the devotion of parents to bringing up children in affection. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we have moved not necessarily in universal practice, but in principle, to families in which coercion is pathology,⁴² in which all family members expect openness, trust, communication, and a degree of equality. Anthony Giddens has said:

When we apply these principles [such as equality, openness, trust] – as ideals, I would stress again – to relationships we are talking of something very important – the possible emergence of what I shall call a democracy of the emotions in everyday life. A democracy of the emotions, it seems to me, is as important as public democracy in improving the quality of our lives.⁴³

Among some historians such as Reddy and Stone a trend is noticeable: away from ideas of emotions as inhering largely in individuals (another piece of folk theory, to which the idea of boiling liquid is related) towards ideas that the principal effects of emotions are social.

Emotions are the underlying structures both of our more public and of our more intimate relationships. The creativity to which we are invited by emotions depends on the society in which we live, and the ideas and concepts of such societies change with time. During a lifetime each of us may begin to make sense of the patterns of our emotions. We can come to think not so much of what to do about our own individual experience, as of how to understand and take part in the emotions of the communities to which we belong.