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The Role of the Arts in the History of Emotions: Aesthetic Experience and Emotion as Method

Erin Sullivan

What role do the arts play in the study of the history of emotions? This essay reflects on the position that aesthetic works and arts-oriented methodologies have occupied in the field's development since the early 2000s. It begins by connecting artistic sources to anxieties about impressionism within cultural history, before looking at examples from literature that help illustrate the advantages works of art can bring to the study of emotion over time. Chief among these benefits is the power of artistic sources to create emotional worlds for their audiences – including, of course, historians. Ultimately, in arguing for a greater use of aesthetic works in our field, the essay makes the case for a more overtly emotional history of the emotions.

Keywords: historiography; methodology; emotion and aesthetics; literature; improvisation; interdisciplinarity

'How can a historian gain access to the passions of the dead?'[1]

Peter Burke's question, first posed at the opening of a conference on 'Representing Emotions' in 2001, is one that preoccupies every historian of feeling, regardless of the historical period, region, social group, or cultural topic we choose to study. How do we sort through letters, administrative records, medical pamphlets, court testimonies, scientific treatises, political speeches, and personal diaries to understand and reconstruct the emotional life of the past? Even for our colleagues studying very recent history, who might have the

[1] Peter Burke, 'Is There a Cultural History of the Emotions?,' in *Representing Emotions: New Connections in the Histories of Art, Music and Medicine*, ed. Penelope Gouk and Helen Hills (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 39.

possibility of speaking with still-living subjects, how can we really know what it was like to live and feel in a time gone by – and why, in the end, does it matter?[2]

Historians of emotion have been asking themselves these sorts of questions for a long time now. There has been a tendency to think of ourselves as a perpetually new and emergent field, propelled first into being by a series of affective turns in the 1990s and early 2000s, and then by the formation of a number of major research centres around the world in the later 2000s and 2010s. But it is worth pausing to take stock of these dates and to acknowledge – as well as celebrate – the fact that an area of study known as 'the history of emotions' has now been around for nearly twenty years. When Burke gave his state-of-the-field address in the early 2000s, he focused in large part on why the discipline, whose roots stretched back to at least the nineteenth century, had suffered so long from what he called a 'failure to fly'.[3] Almost two decades later, the landscape has changed considerably: many more conferences have come, those aforementioned research centres have taken shape, and several book series and journals dedicated to the history of emotions have emerged (including this one).

Reflecting on such developments, Rob Boddice has commented on 'the rude health of the field', which is now producing '[n]ew scholarship … at a rate that makes even just keeping up with the reading a difficult task', and elsewhere I have similarly concluded that 'we have at last taken off as a field, and in more directions than one'.[4] There is a wonderful freedom that comes with that sense of having taken off, and even perhaps of having arrived. But before we rush off in our respective directions, Burke's essay raises another point that bears further consideration: 'The kinds of document historians use most do not tell us very

[2] This article was first delivered as a keynote address at the International Society for Cultural History's 2017 biennial conference at Umeå University, Sweden. I am grateful to Jonas Liliequist and the organising committee for inviting me to speak, to colleagues for their questions and comments, and to Andrew Lynch, Katie Barclay, and my peer reviewers for their feedback as I prepared this talk for publication.
[3] Ibid., 35.
[4] Rob Boddice, 'The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future,' *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 62 (2017): 10-15 (14); Erin Sullivan, 'The History of the Emotions: Past, Present, Future,' *Cultural History* 2, no. 1 (2013): 93-102 (101).

much about emotions'.[5] What does Burke mean by such a provocative statement? Partly, I think, that emotional histories, like cultural histories, demand a variety of sources that often emerge from unexpected places, but also that when it comes to emotions, the sorts of documentary sources that have so often proven the foundation of historical work might not be enough. 'No wonder then that the field was more or less abandoned to specialists in literature', Burke continues, and that 'two of the pioneers in this field, [Jacob] Burckhardt and [Johan] Huizinga, were also unusual in their day in their use of the testimony of art and literature'.[6] Through these comments, Burke indirectly suggests that works of art might be especially valuable in the unlocking of emotional histories.

The question of the role of the arts in the writing of the history of emotions – including their arguable marginalisation – is the focus of this reflective essay. It should be noted at the outset that there are now many publications by literary scholars, art historians, and musicologists that deal in emotion, history, and the arts, as well as a handful of major studies by historians that have embraced artistic sources.[7] That said, extended engagement with aesthetic works at the methodological and historiographical heart of our field – primarily shaped, I would suggest, by historians – remains somewhat atypical, or at least undertheorised.[8] The result, literary and emotions scholar Sarah McNamer has argued, has been 'something of a disciplinary impasse'.[9]

Such a situation is remarkable given our field's long-standing preoccupation both with interdisciplinarity and with questions of methodology, from Peter and Carol Stearns's

[5] Burke, 'Is There a Cultural History,' 39.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Important examples of the latter include Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[8] Literary scholars, art historians, musicologists, and other scholars of the arts are of course major contributors to the field, but the fact remains that the majority of the international research centres and publication outlets for the history of emotions are led – very admirably – by historians.
[9] Sarah McNamer, 'The Literariness of Literature and the History of Emotion,' *PMLA* 130, no. 5 (2015): 1433-42 (1435).

'emotionology' to Reddy's 'emotives' to Barbara Rosenwein's 'emotional communities', each of which has sought to theorise what we can know of emotion from representational sources. Nevertheless, the study of fiction and the arts has remained somewhat muted. Plamper, in his near-exhaustive introduction to the history of emotions, advocates for the relevance of the novels of Sterne, Tolstoy, and Proust, as well as Leon Battista Alberti's theories of painting to the study of emotion in history, but he refrains from saying much about how these artistic sources might differ from their more traditionally historical counterparts in terms of form, function, and emotional effect.[10] This is not a criticism of Plamper himself, who has gone into much more detail about the emotional power of images in his monograph *The Stalin Cult*, and who in this introductory book has enough to contend with in terms of the nature of emotion itself and the complicated historical field that has developed around it. Rather, it is a more general observation as to how, on the whole, the most influential methodological and theoretical contributions to our field have tended to glance at literary and artistic sources without delving too deeply into what their formal features and imaginative commitments might add to the debate.

With that in mind, this essay is intended as a foray into the philosophical and methodological questions surrounding the role of the arts in the history of the emotions – and, indeed, in the representation and creation of emotion more broadly. In doing so, I will focus primarily on literature, drama, and narrative art in early modern England, my own area of expertise, but I hope that some of my conclusions might prove useful for thinking about the arts in general. In my attempt to achieve such ends, I consider three questions: first, why have scholars in the history of the emotions sometimes been wary of aesthetic works as source material? Second, what can the arts offer us that other sources cannot? And, third, what might a history that takes seriously the emotional power of the arts look like?

[10] Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Against impressionism

To begin with question one: why have historians of emotions sometimes avoided aesthetic works as core source materials? A central reason, I would suggest, is a desire among many scholars to differentiate, or at least distance, the field from its earlier history. As I have already mentioned, Burke cites Burckhardt and Huizinga as two of the field's earliest pioneers, though he notes that the methods they deployed in their respectively epic studies were 'impressionistic rather than systematic'.[11] Part of that impressionism involved drawing liberally on literature and visual art, and sometimes using these sources to stand for the emotional temperament of a nation or time period without detailed attention to context. Such an approach, which also extended beyond the use of artistic sources, could at times lead to reductive accounts of the emotional lives of past cultures.

Rosenwein has written persuasively about the problematic impact that Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* has had on perceptions of the medieval period, and on the concept of 'modernity' more generally.[12] Of course, we must remember that this scholarship – extraordinary and ground-breaking in so many ways – is roughly one hundred years old, and consequently that it must be approached within the context of its own historical moment. For better or worse, our objects of knowledge, our perceptions of truth, our understandings of human nature have changed in many ways from those prevalent during the early twentieth century. Notions of methodological rigour and the place of evaluative judgment in the writing of history have shifted too, contributing to the criticisms that certain works by earlier scholars, as well as the use of artistic sources within them, have faced in more recent years.

[11] Burke, 'Is There a Cultural History,' 39.
[12] Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History,' *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2005): 821-45; Rosenwein, 'Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions,' *History Compass* 8, no. 8 (2010): 282-42.

Indeed, in his own consideration of the 'problem' of cultural history, Peter Mandler has highlighted how concerns about impressionism have plagued the field more broadly:

> Many people who do not practise cultural history – and too many people who do – think that it is easy, simply a matter of surfing through the web of representations, sampling it ad lib, and interpreting it ditto. A lot of cultural history *is* written in that way.

The antidote, he suggests, has been (and continues to be) a 'reinfusion of discipline', and 'more attention to methodological niceties'.[15] Whether directly or indirectly, such advice has certainly been heeded by historians of emotions, who over the past two decades have worked hard to establish robust approaches to studying something as ineffable and ephemeral as emotional experience. Artistic sources, associated as they often are with earlier, more anecdotal, and more generalising approaches to cultural history, have often, as a result, fallen somewhat by the wayside. Though they still appear in quotations and illustrations, they are often peripheral, incidental, and even decorative in their purpose. Perhaps this is because, for many historians, other kinds of source do the job better, allowing them to avoid the somewhat suspect or at the very least slippery qualities sometimes associated the arts. Others may also feel ill-equipped to interpret the formal features and semiotic potential of aesthetic texts, given that such skills have traditionally been claimed as the remit of other disciplines.

The affordances of art

But what is remarkable, and indeed very useful, about imaginative and artistic source materials is the way that they both reflect, and at times even create, lived experience. Which moves me swiftly to my second question: what is it that art might be able to offer us that other sources do not? Both Plato and Aristotle understood art as a means of *imitating reality.* 'Mimesis', as they and many others after them termed artistic craft, is 'the representation or

[15] Peter Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History,' *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 94-117 (95).

imitation of the real world'.[16] In this sense, art could be said to be at a disadvantageous remove: it attempts to imitate and reflect reality, but it always remains at least one step away from it. For those of us working in periods with limited evidence, however, this might not be reason enough to discount such sources entirely: a reflection of lived experience is better than no accounts at all. Furthermore, as I will shortly suggest, there might be ways in which aesthetic sources move beyond reflection and representation.

But to start with my first point about working with limited evidence: in my own period – that is, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England – in which extended first-hand testimonies of deeply emotional experiences such as the loss of a child are not always readily available, literary accounts like Ben Jonson's 'On My First Son' can prove especially valuable to the historian. Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was one of the most successful playwrights and poets of his age: a contemporary of William Shakespeare, Jonson also wrote well-known plays for the London stage and eventually became a court dramatist under King James in the early seventeenth century. Around the same time, his first son, also called Benjamin, died of plague at the age of seven. Literary scholars and historians typically remember Jonson as a cantankerous man, and for good reason: in addition to killing the actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel, he frequently argued with his fellow theatre-makers and belittled their efforts in print.[17] But his elegy for his young son Benjamin, quoted in full below, shows the playwright in a rather different light.

'On My First Son'

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;

[16] 'mimesis, *n.*,' 1. b., *Oxford English Dictionary* online, accessed 21 November 2017, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/118640?redirectedFrom=mimesis.

[17] For an introduction to Jonson's life, see Ian Donaldson, 'Jonson, Benjamin (1572-1637),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online, accessed 21 November 2017, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15116; for the definitive biography, see Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy.

Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,

Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

Oh, could I lose all father now! For why

Will man lament the state he should envy?

To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,

And, if no other misery, yet age?

Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie

BEN. JONSON his best piece of poetry.

For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,

As what he loves may never like too much.[18]

In many ways, these six rhyming couplets fully reflect traditional religious and moral counsel about sorrow and bereavement that was prevalent in the early 1600s in England.[19] Death, not life, should be man's desired state, since it reflects a return to God and a release from worldly suffering. So, Jonson asks, 'why will man lament the state he should envy?', and he also notes that his beloved son has 'escaped' the 'world's and flesh's rage', not to mention the miseries of old age.[20] And yet, in this poem that G. W. Pigman has characterised as particularly personal and possessive, Jonson struggles to feel completely at peace with the loss of his son, his 'right hand', his 'joy'.[21] 'My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy', he writes, adding that he wishes he could view Ben's death not as a parent but as a more impartial onlooker: 'Oh, could I lose all father now!' For while he is able to acknowledge the

[18] Ben Jonson, '45. On My First Son,' in *Epigrams* (1616), ed. Colin Burrow, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* online, accessed 21 November 2017, http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/works/epigrams/facing/?hl=on%20my%20first%20son#.

[19] See Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19-25, 52; Sullivan, 'A Disease unto Death: Sadness in the Time of Shakespeare,' in *Emotions and Health 1200-1700*, ed. Elena Carrera (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 159-83 (174-80).

[20] For more on the theological underpinnings of Jonson's poem, see W. David Kay, 'The Christian Wisdom of Ben Jonson's "On My First Sonne,"' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 11, no. 1 (1971): 125-36.

[21] G. W. Pigman, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 88.

wisdom of the widely repeated belief in this period that death represents a blessed reunion with God, he is not able to rejoice in it himself. If anything, his son's death has taught him to temper his affections, both now and in the future: 'henceforth, all his vows be such, / As what he loves may never like too much'. The historian of emotion will of course note the pointed distinction Jonson makes here between *loving* and *liking* a treasured child, as well as the emotional finesse he displays in submitting himself to cultural norms about death while also subtly eluding them.

Jonson's poem is certainly mimetic in the sense that it is 'world-reflecting': when the historian reads it, she gains insight not only into the social codes governing grief and bereavement in seventeenth-century England, but also how one individual worked – and at times struggled – to make sense of them. In addition to being 'world-reflecting', however, I would go further and suggest that poems like Jonson's are also what we might call 'world-creating'. I borrow this term from Stephen Halliwell, who in his study of ancient aesthetics has examined what he calls the 'enactive' potential of mimetic art, by which he means the power of the art work to engage in both 'a representational tracing of emotion "in" the work (or performance) and, at the same time, the communication of that emotion to the audience'. 'This model', he continues, 'treats mimesis as not only a matter of the representational properties of an object, but also a form and vehicle of experience'.[22]

'A form and vehicle of experience'. I want to pause here for a moment because I think that this is an essential issue when it comes to artfully crafted, mimetic sources in the writing of history – emotional and otherwise. The aim of such works is not just to mirror experience, but also to produce it in the minds of audiences and readers, and in this sense they go far beyond functioning as a second-best repository for the scant-of-evidence. Writers and teachers in the Renaissance were all too aware of this potential, particularly when it came to

[22] Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 161.

the skilful use of rhetoric, which occupied an important place in every schoolboy's education.[23] Both then and now, aesthetic works are fundamentally participatory in their design: they are brought to life not simply by the artist who creates them, but also by the auditor or spectator who receives them. In the introduction to *Beyond Melancholy*, I write about the emotional work involved in using artistic texts, and in particular literature, as a source material:

> The act of engaging with and responding to a mimetic work … becomes a process of living and labouring within the work – 'playing it', as [Roland] Barthes would say – and in doing so helping produce the intellectual, sensory, and emotional fields it seeks to create.[24]

Like a musical instrument, a work of art – be it a poem, a painting, an opera, or anything else – requires an audience to channel energy into it, play it, and thereby bring it to life and '*make it go*', to quote Barthes once again.[25]

My own conviction is that the richer and more complex the aesthetic work is, the greater the emotional labour that it demands of its readers. In their formative account of conceptual language, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that 'metaphors that are imaginative and creative', as opposed to 'ordinary' and 'conventional' (the main focus of their study), 'are capable of giving us a new understanding of our experience'.[26] While unconventional modes of expression are certainly present in a wide variety of sources, literature and other narrative arts frequently make them their hallmark. This might suggest that artful language and more typical forms of speech are too distant from one another, with poetic expression spiralling off into the realm of the idiosyncratic and culturally exceptional, but the linguist Zoltán Kövecses has emphasised how the unusual

[23] Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-47.
[24] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, 8.
[25] Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text,' in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. and trans. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 73-81 (79-80).
[26] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [1980] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 139.

richness of literary metaphors frequently finds its root in more commonplace forms of thinking and expression:

> *Ordinary metaphors*, then, are not things that poets and writers leave behind when they do their 'creative' work. On the contrary, there is accumulating evidence that suggests that 'creative' people make heavy use of conventional, everyday metaphors, and that their creativity and originality actually derive from them.[27]

The implication here is that the meaning found in artful language is at once more generative and still of a piece with other linguistic utterances. It is not fundamentally separate in terms of how it creates meaning, and yet the meaning that it does create typically demands more imaginative and, indeed, emotional work from its readers and audiences. McNamer has bemoaned the fact that 'the more literary the text, the less likely it is to be regarded as a valuable source for the history of feeling', largely due to its perceived 'flamboyan[ce]', 'polyvalen[ce]', and general interpretive 'untrustworth[iness]'.[28] Thinking about artful texts as singular in style and impact, and yet fundamentally connected in kind to other types of expression, might help us start to overcome this reticence.

Indeed, looking back to Jonson's poem, we might consider how its intimate, first-person voice, and its careful use of language, offers readers a powerful glimpse into one father's experience of child loss. At the same time, some readers might rightly point out that in certain ways it is not that different from more traditionally expository, first-person historical accounts. In this explicitly autobiographical poem, Jonson is writing directly from personal experience, and in this sense it straddles the realms of the documentary and the aesthetic. Perhaps it would be helpful, then, to look at another account of child loss from this period that is not directly autobiographical, and to consider what it offers us as a source for the history of emotion – for instance, a scene from Shakespeare's 1596 history play, *King John*. Halfway into the drama, a gentlewoman named Constance comes on stage and disrupts

[27] Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.
[28] McNamer, 'The Literariness of Literature,' 1435.

a conversation between the King of France and his advisors, who are deep in political debate. It is an unsettling and in some ways disjointed moment. As these eminent men discuss their nation's setbacks at war, a woman described in a modern stage direction as '*distracted*' – otherwise known as 'mad' – enters the scene and demands that they shift their attention to a very personal issue: the fact that her young son Arthur has gone missing and is feared dead.[29]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the men are not particularly interested. 'Look who comes here! A grave unto a soul', the King comments, before asking Constance to leave quietly, or at the very least to have some 'Patience' (3.4.17, 22). But in stark contrast to the many books of moral advice from the period, which recommended that the bereaved temper their sorrow with meditations on the mutability of human life and the promises of something better after death, Constance refuses all attempts at comfort.[30] 'No, I defy all counsel, all redress', she responds (3.4.23), and when the men scold her, saying that she 'hold[s] too heinous a respect of grief', and that she is 'as fond of grief as of [her] child', she sharply rejects their commands to contain, what for her, is an overwhelming sorrow (3.4.90-92). 'He talks to me that never had a son', she continues, before launching into a eulogisation not just of her son Arthur but of grief itself:

> Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
> Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
> Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
> Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
> Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.
> Then have I reason to be fond of grief?
> Fare you well. Had you such a loss as I,

[29] William Shakespeare, *King John*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.4.16 s.d. All references to Shakespeare are from this edition.
[30] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, 19-25, 52; Sullivan, 'A Disease unto Death,' 174-80.

I could give better comfort than you do. (3.4.93-100)

In this evocative speech, which has since become one of the play's most famous, the character of Constance does many things at once. First, she rejects the idea that extreme emotion is something that can or should be managed away. Second, she implies that her own suffering gives her a source of power that she ordinarily would not have: though she possesses only 'a lady's feeble voice', her terrible 'passion' allows her to 'shake the world' around her – including the political dealings of these men – in a way that she usually could not (3.4.39-41). But third, and arguably most movingly for the reader, she imagines grief as an extended metaphor for Arthur himself. Her passion stands in for her 'absent child', accompanying her through her daily routines and filling up the void that he has left in her life, whether in terms of his now-useless clothes or his harrowingly empty bed. Grief *is* Constance's comfort, in that continues to animate the memory of her child even after he is gone. To let go of such a feeling, she suggests, or even to let it subside, would be to lose what little of her son she has left.

In such moments, we can hear voices from the past negotiating with and reimaging the emotional rules of their time – that is, of resisting general codes. Such an occurrence should not surprise us, of course: in our emotional own lives I am sure than many of us have found that there can be some distance between how we are told we *should* feel about an event and how it *actually* affects us. It is a disjunction that did not go unnoticed in the early modern period either. '[E]veryone can master a grief but he that has it', Shakespeare wrote in *Much Ado about Nothing* (3.3.26-7), and a few years later the statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) similarly commented that, when it came to the challenge of understanding and managing one's emotional life, '[r]eading good books of morality is a little

flat and dead'.[31] According to Bacon, although the ancient stoics left some reflections on the subject of emotion, they focused their energies more 'in subtilty of definitions (which in a subject of this nature are but curiosities) than in active and ample descriptions and observations'. And while he allowed that 'some particular writings of an elegant nature touching some of the affections' had been composed in this period, he suggested that they lacked the vividness and sense of infinite dimension that came with the actual experience of passion in everyday life.[32]

This space between collective emotional rules and individual emotional realities is something that has proved central to methodological debates within the history of emotions, chiefly because it poses 'the expression vs. experience question' that persistently engages scholars of the field.[33] We can know what people said and taught about emotions, but how can we ever presume to reconstruct what they actually felt? Moments of emotional defiance like Constance's in *King John* open up some scope for navigation between these two poles, since they offer insight into how individual articulations of emotion might go off-script and attempt to forge new structures of feeling. In my own work, I have referred to such moments as 'emotive improvisation', a term and idea that draws on the scholarship of both Reddy and Stephen Greenblatt: Reddy for his theorisation of 'emotives' as perlocutionary and performative utterances, and Greenblatt for his characterisation of cultural improvisation as 'the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario'.[34] Emotive improvisation, I argue, happens when 'the more probing, creative,

[31] Francis Bacon, 'Of Friendship,' in *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 394.
[32] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning, Book Two*, in *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 259.
[33] Nicole Eustace, Eugenia Lean, Julie Livingston, Jan Plamper, William M. Reddy, and Barbara Rosenwein, '*AHR* Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions,' *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1487-1531 (1503).
[34] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, 8-9. See also William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96-111; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 222-54.

and even combative variety of Reddy's emotives' allow people – both in the past and the present – to 'find new pathways through and sometimes beyond existing emotional standards and scripts'.[35]

As many of us will know, potential for surprise – improvisation – the unexpected – can be found in many different kinds of historical source. Many a court record contains a deliciously defiant comment that upends prescribed emotional norms, as do numerous diaries, letters, and personal testimonies. So what, if anything, makes literature or other works of art any different? There are a few things, I think. First, given literature's position outside of the transparently 'real', it often possesses greater license to defy conventions, or to say the unsayable, than more documentary sources. For instance, in his study of neo-Confucian emotion in China, Norman Kutcher has argued that, in poetry, people 'could express the full range of human feeling – including, most importantly, those feelings that went against the dictates of strict Confucian orthodoxy'.[36] Elsewhere, Matthew Kieran has drawn on film and television to explore how narrative art 'often solicit[s] the suspension of particular moral assumptions in order to imaginatively explore different ways of seeing, feeling, responding to, and valuing the world'.[37] In such cases, the fictional quality of works of art becomes an advantage rather than a drawback: in plays, films, and the like, characters are often at greater liberty to challenge emotional customs and entertain deviant emotional scenarios than real people were in their everyday life. Of course, these imagined moments of defiance remain fictional acts, but they do help shape the historical record in terms of reflecting real scenarios that real people in the period imagined, contemplated, and discussed.

[35] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, 9.
[36] Norman Kutcher, 'The Skein of Chinese Emotions History,' in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 57-73 (64).
[37] Matthew Kieran, 'Emotions, Art, and Immorality,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 681-703 (683).

Second, in my own experience of studying sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, instances of emotive improvisation in literature are often richer and more self-aware than comparable moments in more traditional historical sources. I do not want to generalise too broadly here, since there are of course many examples of non-artistic, historical sources in various periods that offer sustained accounts of emotional complexity and defiance.[38] I would simply say that in my own research, when it comes to personal testimonies of people expressing emotions that differ sharply from accepted standards, the articulation can often be striking but frustratingly succinct: one example, for instance, is a fleeting entry in a parish record for a woman who died of 'Greife, at Bethlem' – just one, tantalising sentence.[39] Literary texts, in contrast, often develop emotional situations in more depth, meditating on their development, their complexities, and their wide-reaching consequences.[40] In doing so, they invite researchers to imagine themselves into a more fully realised emotional world, helping to enrich and extend briefer glimpses found in some documentary texts.

Which brings me to my third and final point about the difference that art makes – and also, I think, the most important one. Artistic sources, almost by definition, are emotional machines, experimenting liberally with the enactive potential discussed at the start of this section. There are very few works of art that set out *not* to make their audiences feel something (even if that something is revulsion, estrangement, or confusion). Bacon certainly

[38] One example that comes to mind are the extensive and at times conflicting accounts that emerged in response to the apostasy and death in 1548 of Francesco Spiera. See Michael MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England,' *Journal of British Studies* 31, no. 1 (1992): 32-61; M. A. Overell, 'The Exploitation of Francesco Spiera,' *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 3 (1995): 619-37. The fact that Spiera's story became the subject matter of at least one contemporary play, Nathaniel Woodes's *The Conflict of Conscience*, and perhaps also influenced Christopher Marlowe's far-more famous *Dr Faustus*, re-exposes this example to the particular emotional affordances of literature. See David Bevington, 'Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Nathaniel Woodes's *The Conflict of Conscience*,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485-1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 704-17.

[39] Entry for 'Suzan daughter of Tho:[mas] Jaupper' in Guildhall Library MS 6419, vol. 5 (Baptisms, marriages, and burials in St Giles Cripplegate, 1653-7), 6v.

[40] See for instance the many fictionalised accounts of sorrow, madness, and illness discussed in Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

recognised this: in his rejection of the ability of treatises on the passions to capture the complex realities of emotional experience, he remarked that 'the poets and writers of histories are the best doctors of this knowledge', for in their works

> we may find painted forth with great life, how affections are kindled and incited; and how pacified and refrained; and how again contained from act and further degree; how they disclose themselves, how they work, how they vary, how they gather and fortify…[41]

For Bacon, and for many others since, poetic, narrative, and artistic works possess a unique capacity to teach us about emotion by showing it to us. The fact that the best of these works do so by depicting it 'with great life' is particularly important: through such vividness we are invited not just to observe but also to experience passion and feeling, and in doing so to understand it more deeply than would otherwise be possible.

More than four hundred years later, I do not think many people would argue that art *is not* emotional. Indeed, the psychologist Keith Oatley, in his introduction to the emotions, has drawn on the writings of the philosopher Robin Collingwood as a way of positing that '[a]rt is – quite simply – the expression of emotions'.[42] 'When we pick up a book of non-fiction we hope to be informed', Oatley argues, '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'.[43] While I do not wish to draw too sharp of a divide between fiction and non-fiction, or indeed between knowledge and affection (thus unhelpfully resurrecting old binaries between reason and emotion), I do think it is the case that artistic sources tend to be particularly interested in not just the representation of emotion but also the creation of it, namely through their formal engagements. Whether it is the use of narrative voice in a novel, the composition of the *mise-en-scène* in a film, the choice of key in a song, or the development of a metaphorical image in a poem, works of art are constantly exploring how formal craft shapes affective, and intellective, response among their audiences.

[41] Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, 259.
[42] Keith Oatley, *Emotions: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 13.
[43] Ibid., 6.

As Eugenie Brinkema suggests at the start of her study of form and feeling in cinema, '[t]he turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Affect is not the place where reading is no longer needed'.[44] Close engagement with an artful text's formal construction helps unlock its *world-creating* potential, opening up realms of experience that are rooted in the past but have the potential to stretch through time to the present.

The emotional historian

This sort of participatory, cross-historical 'world-creation' is tantalising in that it begins to suggest that we as scholars may in some way be able to step into and become part of a past world – not just through the *study* of it, but also through the *emotional experience* of it. Alarm bells may be ringing by now in the minds of fellow historians, and for good reason: the idea of participating in the emotive world of an artistic work, and of using that experience to try to understand the past, immediately raises concerns about subjectivity, bias, anachronism, and, indeed – to return to the issue raised at the start of this essay – impressionism. It is one thing to position emotion as the *subject* of historical study, but quite another to deploy it as a *method* of scholarly inquiry.

But finding a way to acknowledge and incorporate emotional experience – not just of the past, but also in the present – into the history of the emotion is, I think, an important ambition for our field. Stephanie Trigg has reflected on this thorny issue in an article on the relationship between the history of emotions and the related, but often very distant, field affect theory. 'Last year I attended a talk by an expert historian charting a history of loss and the destruction of her subject matter in the English reformation', Trigg writes:

[44] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), xiv.

> In question time she was asked how she felt about that loss. 'I'm a historian,' she replied, 'it's not my job to feel.' And yet her talk had been nothing if not evocative, so that her audience, at least, had been encouraged to feel something of this loss.[45]

Trigg's point here, I think, is not just that we must establish a space and purpose for feeling within the methodologies of cultural and emotional history, but also that feeling is something that many of us are already using, even if we are reluctant to admit it. Emotion is a vital part of our scholarly process, whether we are researching, reading, analysing, or writing. Martha Nussbaum has written convincingly and copiously on the importance of emotion to philosophy, and I would suggest that we extend her arguments to history as well. 'If emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment', she writes on the very first page of *Upheavals of Thought*, 'and if they contain in themselves an awareness of value or importance, they cannot … easily be sidelined in accounts of ethical judgment, as so often they have been in the history of philosophy'.[46] Or, indeed, in the history of history. For if emotions are an intrinsic part of judgment, imagination, reason, and understanding, as a growing number of scholars in both the sciences and humanities believe they are, then they must also play a fundamental role in the perception and creation of history.[47]

Which brings me, in a rather roundabout way, to this essay's third and concluding question: what might a history of the emotions that takes seriously the emotional power of the arts look like? My feeling – so to speak – is that such a history is one that also takes seriously the role of emotion in the scholarly study of the past: that is, one that creates an intellectual

[45] Stephanie Trigg, 'Introduction: Emotional Histories – Beyond the Personalization of the Past and the Abstraction of Affect Theory,' *Exemplaria* 26, no. 1 (2014): 3-15 (11).
[46] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.
[47] Lisa Feldman Barrett, whose work on 'constructed emotion' Reddy has playfully described as a 'hunting license' for historians in our field, is perhaps the most prominent advocate for the interdependence of emotion and thought in the cognitive sciences (qtd in Boddice, 'History of Emotions,' 13 n. 8). See in particular her book, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2017). Social scientists such as Margaret Wetherell, philosophers such as Giovanna Colombetti, and political scientists such as Linda Zerilli have likewise argued for a more joined-up view of thinking and feeling; for a discussion of all three see Evelyn Tribble, 'Affective Contagion on the Early Modern Stage,' in *Affect Theory and Early Modern Texts: Politics, Ecologies, and Form*, ed. Amanda Bailey and Mario DiGangi (Palgrave, 2017), 195-212.

and methodological space for what we might call 'the emotional historian'. This does not mean a historian who assembles a historical narrative solely through her own, present-day emotional response to sources, but rather one who allows emotional response to work in tandem with more traditional forms of scholarship, producing a reflexive partnership. Scholarly rigour remains, underpinned by all the methodological developments that the field has seen over the past several decades, but a more open and even championing stance on the role of emotion in both the researching and writing of the history of emotions also emerges. Emotion, in this sense, becomes part of our method as well as our subject.

On this point I think that historians of emotion can learn a lot from the best studies in affect theory. Though I share some critics' concerns about the selective application of scientific evidence in some affect theory work, and the primacy given above all to the body, I admire the openness of affect theorists such as Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth not just to the '*in between-ness*' that traverses body and soul, experience and expression, thought and action, but also the 'in between-ness' that is created when the scholar engages with her sources in thought and writing – that is, between past and present.[48] The best work in affect theory pays attention to the emotionality of source texts, the emotional positioning of the scholar-author, and the emotional dimension of the writing that she crafts from all this. In the words of Gregg and Seigworth, 'affect serves as force and form' in such work, producing a conceptual 'stretching' that allows for an account of emotion as a 'process always underway rather than [a] position taken'.[49] Through a similar valuing of process, we might become even

[48] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers,' in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Seigworth and Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-25 (1). The most influential critique of affect theory by a historian remains Ruth Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique,' *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434-72. Leys's article poses an important challenge to the idea of non-conscious, non-intentional feeling present in some affect theory (in particular the work of Brian Massumi), but, as Katherine Ibbett suggests, its characterisation of the field is 'overly broad' and 'tends to lump very different kinds of affect work together'; Ibbett, '"When I Do, I Call It Affect,"' *Paragraph* 40, no. 2 (2017): 244-53 (252 n. 5).
[49] Seigworth and Gregg, 'Inventory of Shimmers,' 4-5, 10-11.

more alert to the idiosyncrasies and improvisations at work in emotional histories, as well as our own scholarly and writerly efforts to document and reanimate them.

Finally, to return more centrally to the arts, and in doing so to conclude: while the kind of emotional history that I have been describing can certainly happen irrespective of artistic sources, my belief is that it is particularly fuelled and enriched by them. It is difficult to talk adequately about a complex, enduring work of art without engaging with it emotionally, even if that affection remains buried in the subtext. So my interest, really, is in bringing both art and emotion out into the open, and in experimenting more boldly – and baldly – with ways of incorporating them into twenty-first-century histories of the emotions. In the introduction to their essay collection, *Doing Emotions History*, Susan Matt and Peter Stearns suggest that the next step for our field is to 'help make the next generation of emotions research more intentional and systematic', and to this I would add more imaginative, affective, and art-laden.[50] Matt and Stearns's collection is encouraging in this regard, including as it does essays that use poetry and mass media as source materials. For without a continuing – and ideally growing – emphasis on the arts, imagination, and the emotion of the scholar, I fear that we risk writing very proficient but ultimately somewhat arid accounts of what people thought about feeling when they were not actually feeling it. Or, to return to Bacon, that our discussion of emotion, which brings so much vividness to life, will ironically remain 'a little flat and dead'.

The sort of iterative, compound, and fundamentally interdisciplinary method I am advocating for is by no means easy, of course – there is a reason after all that Nietzsche described his vision for a history of the emotions as '*Something for the industrious*'.[51] But as difficult and perhaps even as impossible as such a history might be, it is also deeply exciting,

[50] Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, 'Introduction,' in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. Matt and Stearns (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 1-13 (12).
[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 34-5.

principally because it aspires to the highest aims of interdisciplinary study. According to Barthes, such 'work is not a peaceful operation' and 'cannot be accomplished by simple confrontations between various specialized branches of knowledge':

> [I]t begins *effectively* when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down … to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is in the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront.[52]

It requires that we stretch ourselves beyond the sources, methods, and questions most familiar to our own discipline, and also that we spend as much time as we can learning from others. The happy news is that the history of emotions is already very good at doing this: ideas from anthropology, cognitive science, histories of the arts, philosophy, and sociology frequently find a home within the field. The proposal, then, is that we consider taking this openness even further, allowing sources and methods sometimes unfamiliar within the discipline of history to edge ever closer to the centre of our collective pursuits. Given how deeply art makes so many of *us* feel, it seems a particularly good place to start; in giving it greater weight within the history of emotions as a field, we might also find that the affective experience of the scholar, and the invaluable intellectual work that it does, can come more fully into view.

[52] Barthes, 'From Work to Text,' 73.