

Dangerous passions:
Emotions as Social Threat in Early Modern French Literature

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The following reflections are based on a essay which was first published in 1982 and authored by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Originally written in German, this essay was translated into English and published by Harvard University Press in 1986 and finally reprinted by Stanford University Press in 1998. It is entitled *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*. It is my purpose to show that the subject of Luhmann's book, love as passion, has something to do with the theme of our workshop – or let's better say with the first part of it, discourses on social threats, because the second part – the relevance of the issue for public education – will not be treated in my presentation. But I do hope that the focus on the discourses of passion – and this means basically on irrational outbursts and their devastating effects on social or moral orders – could be fruitful for discussing educational issues, too.

Within the framework of our workshop topic it might appear inconvenient that Luhmann's observations are mainly centered on materials of the early modern period and therefore seem to be less relevant to our twenty first century concerns. But I do believe that a historical view on the phenomenon of social threat could help us to recognize and shape the mechanisms which are at stake when social harmony is disordered by threats originating with whatever reason is in question. It is true that love and passion or love as passion sounds rather strange as a reason why society should lose stability in the sense of political, social or moral uproars, but the theme of love, at least as far as it concerns its appearance in literature, mostly functions as a symbolic discourse which goes far beyond the semantics of love in a romantic comedy. On the contrary, the

meaning of love in literature refers in most cases to social, religious, philosophical, epistemological or moral issues. So Luhmann points out that in mid-seventeenth-century treatises and fictional works, especially in France, love is no longer codified as a socially ritualized play whose parts had been inherited from the medieval tradition of courtly love, but as a passion, this means as a strong and barely controllable emotion incompatible with social rules and moral norms.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, in a huge number of French novels destined to be read by the courtly society love appears as a social practice performed according to certain rules which are meant to be strategies in order to successfully seduce – or let's better say to conquer – the person who is the object of the courtier's desire. Love is like a game called at that time „gallantry“. Once the lover has achieved his aim, the game is over, the winner takes it all and he restarts a new love affair. The game of love is planned and emotionless, it only serves as self-accomplishment for the lover, or as self-fashioning, as Stephen Grenblatt put it when he described the Renaissance noble man's process of constructing his identity and public persona according to a set of socially accepted standards.¹ The game of love is a fundamental part of the courtly society's rites, if not its only preoccupation. Since Louis the fourteenth had domesticated the members of the noble class at his court, depriving them of all privileges they had during the social system of feudalism which still dominated before his reign, the French nobility was condemned to leisure. Many of them left the lands they formerly held from the Crown in exchange for military service and moved to Louis' court in Paris or Versailles or next to it, as Nobert Elias has pointed out in his book on *The Court Society* (transl. Oxford 1983, original Darmstadt 1969). In the shadow of the Sun King's sovereignty they tried to compensate the loss of their own power by looking for a new battlefield

¹ See Stephen Grenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

which might guarantee high social prestige and standing. This battlefield was found on the courtly stage of love affairs. From now on the nobles were devoted to love in the same way as they formerly were to their military campaigns, carefully planning, rationally executing and totally being assigned to the task of conquering the other. It's not by accident that the rhetoric of military strategies is often metaphorically used to describe the art of seduction in seventeenth-century French novels and treatises.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, another form of love erupted every once and a while in the narrative discourse of French literature. The foremost examples are *The Princess of Clèves*, written by Madame de Lafayette and published anonymously in 1678 in Paris, and *The Portuguese Letters*, one of the first French epistolary novels probably written by a less famous author named Guilleragues and anonymously published, too, in 1669. The author's anonymity in the latter novel suggests to the reader that the first person narrator, a Portuguese nun who fell in love with a French officer on duty in Portugal, is longing in her letters for her beloved who had to go back to France, but did not answer to her continuing declarations of love in the letters she sent to him. The quality of both of the characters' love could be described in terms of a passion which is against all reason and social expectations, so much the individual is governed by his or her emotions. This is the moment when emotions are becoming dangerous to social, moral or even political orders. In the chapter entitled „The Rhetoric of Excess and the Experience of Instability“, Luhmann draws our attention to the power of these passionate feelings and their threatening potential with regard to the customs and institutions of social life. I quote:

„As a consequence, both the semantics of love and the external presentation of love involve a more or less pronounced distancing from *raison* and *prudence*

(reason and cautiousness). Showing that one could control one's passion would be a poor way of showing passion. The imperative of excessiveness in turn symbolizes differentiation, i.e. the transcendence of behavioural limits set predominantly by the family. Furthermore, excess differentiates love from the laws of conversational sociability. ... In the final instance it is precisely the excessiveness of passion which lends clearer contours to its social forms and characteristics. ... extreme values function to render normal regulations ineffective.“ (Luhmann 1998, 67) End of quote.

What Luhmann emphasizes here is that irrational feelings of love are codified in French fictional works of the second half of the sixteen hundreds as a literary code which mainly signifies opposition to social and moral regulations in private or public spheres.

As far as it concerns our topic, it is worth noting that strong emotions seem to have the potential to resist laws, moral codes or other behavioural conventions of established social systems. This potential is grounded in the individual and what makes it dangerous is the fact that the individual is not able to master it. So the outbursts of passionate love always latently claim the abolishment of such norms, for better or for worse. Individual feelings are not principally good, as eighteenth-century sensualists believed it. However, they are efficient as far as their request for going beyond the established rules of societies is concerned. If they remain single voices they surely won't be heard by the leading members of these societies. The Princess of Clèves, for example, who is tempted to commit adultery is hesitates to live her passion because of her guilty conscience towards her husband, the institution of marriage and the founding of the latter in the moral commandments of Christianity. She finally decides to be faithful to her husband and to retire to a convent after his death, a place outside of the mundane world which protects her against the temptations of love. The

Portuguese nun is already in a convent, longing and yearning for her beloved in a place where such feelings are taboo and therefore provocative. But her voice remains isolated, not only unheard by the public, but also by the French officer. Nevertheless, both of these voices are also literary voices and even if they are scarcely heard in their fictional world, they were heard by the readership in Lafayette's and Guilleragues' times. They have also been heard by the readership over the centuries and are still heard in our present times. They show us the power inherent in strong and irrational emotions, in many cases so powerful as to threaten the existence of established social structures. But we have to look very closely to each of these outbursts of passion in order to decide if they are really fruitful or rather harmful with respect to the social system they are questioning. Resolving this problem could be a task for those colleagues who work in the discipline of sociology. In any case, it seems to be interesting to discuss the role of passionate emotions in an educational context – not only those which result from an irresistible love – I chose this example because I am familiar with the literary features of it – but all forms of passion like ambition, hate, pity, sensibility or the burning desire for freedom, i.e. all those strong feelings which could as mass phenomena destabilize social orders.