
H-France Review Vol. 15 (January 2015), No. 10

Patrick Coleman, *Anger, Gratitude and the Enlightenment Writer*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. vii + 249pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 9-780199-589340.

Review by Jay Caplan, Amherst College.

In *Anger, Gratitude and the Enlightenment Writer*, Patrick Coleman examines the ways in which major writers of the French Enlightenment worked through the problems raised by the apparently contradictory emotional states of anger and gratitude. He asks in what circumstances and in what forms writers (from Challe and Marivaux at the beginning of the century to Rousseau and Diderot towards its end) found it socially appropriate, or even necessary, to express anger or gratitude, and to what degree these emotions may be good or bad in themselves. In the process of reconnoitering these key portions of the emotional territory in which they worked, Coleman makes a remarkable contribution to literary history, the social history of the emotions, and even to political theory. One might take issue with the claim that anger and gratitude are polar opposites. After all, even non-human creatures (like bees and bulls) can get angry, and among humans it remains to be seen whether gratitude is a universal emotion or rather what the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has called a “social emotion”.[1] But in this excellent book, the pairing of anger and gratitude enables the reader to gain new insights into the dynamics of social relations (one of the most important of which was the relation between writers and their audiences) during this period, and to view the work of these important writers in a new light.

As he explains in Chapter One (9ff.), Coleman is not so much interested here in Enlightenment philosophies of emotion as in how rhetorical and social constraints gave shape to emotional expression in a country where writers were taking more prominent social and political roles than had previously been the case. His solid knowledge of Biblical and classical Latin sources enables the author to identify the traditions from which French Enlightenment discussions of anger and gratitude flowed. He shows that what was new about these writers and their audiences was the egalitarian assumption that people (or perhaps more accurately, men) of intelligence and sensibility deserved to have their opinions and feelings taken seriously, that they were entitled to feel anger at injustices or slights perpetrated by other human beings, a conviction without which the Revolution would not have been possible. On the other hand, *philosophes* would contend that, since all events were the product of impersonal laws, it made no sense to feel angry at God for perceived injustices. This is the kind of reasoning that would lead Rousseau to define the general will as an impersonal expression of what is truly in the best interest of all citizens. At a time when the gradual emergence of centralized nation-states was weakening the bonds of personal obligation, writers also began to think about gratitude in impersonal terms. If honors were determined by objective criteria rather than personal favors, there would be no need to feel or express gratitude to any single agent (to a person or to God). Hence, deserving people were those who, while maintaining their own sense of dignity, were able to express gratitude in ways that secured recognition of their moral and social worth. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of recent work in Anglo-American social psychology and philosophy that seeks to understand emotions as relational and judgmental, rather than in purely individual terms, and which informs the approach to emotions taken in this study.

Chapter Two is devoted to the work of Robert Challe (1659-1721), a writer of exceptional range (from travel narratives to fiction, memoirs and theology), whose works were either published anonymously or left in manuscript form and are still being discovered. *Les Illustres Françaises* (1713), a collection of seven stories told by different narrators and connected by a frame narrative (in the manner of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the *Heptameron* of Marguerite de Navarre) was the first of these texts to come to the attention of modern audiences. The other text under consideration is an anti-Christian treatise called the *Difficultés sur la religion proposées au Père Malebranche* (1710), a work filled with anger at the human weaknesses that hinder the search for truth. With attention to differences of context and genre, Coleman argues that the ways in which anger was expressed and overcome in these two texts provide complementary demonstrations of the tensions between human autonomy and impersonal laws in the domains of sociability and religion. The novel focused on the difficulty of reconciling people with their partners and with themselves, thereby overcoming the contradiction between recognition and reconciliation, and the capacity of friends to help overcome such conflicts. The treatise, which was basically a theodicy, concentrated on the problem of how to conceive of God's will as both good and just, distinguishing (on the basis of an analogy with the distinction between indignation and anger) between His impartial, absolute will to justice (or *vouloir*) and his will (or *olouvrir*, a word invented by Challe) that all men be worthy of salvation, which is conditioned on men's actions.

Marivaux (1688-1763) is known primarily for his innovative and enduringly popular plays. In Chapter Three, Coleman examines one of Marivaux's two unfinished novels, *La Vie de Marianne* (1726-1741), whose eponymous heroine recounts in an abundance of social and psychological detail how she rose from her beginnings as a poor orphan of uncertain parentage to become a wealthy member of the aristocracy. Just as Challe's texts provide Coleman with rich matter for analysis of the semantic, cultural and philosophical dimensions of anger in the early eighteenth century, Marianne's reflections on what she owes, both materially and morally, to those who helped her along the way enable him to explore the affective and epistemological dimensions of *reconnaissance* during the same period. Since to Marianne it was always emotionally important for other people to recognize her own (noble) value, "the emotional connotations of *reconnaissance* in the sense of gratitude are inseparable from the word's dramatic and epistemological uses to designate the 'recognition' or 'acknowledgement' of a person or a situation in Marianne's story" (p. 30). In this context, I particularly liked Coleman's discussion of how *tendresse*, a term whose meaning was being "democratized" (p. 84) at this time, could provide a way of eliminating from gratitude all sense of humiliating dependence.

The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are literally and figuratively at the center of this book, in two chapters where Coleman concentrates on Rousseau's passionate ambivalence toward both anger and gratitude. The contradictions and paradoxes of Rousseau's work are so obvious that, like other readers of Rousseau, Coleman is drawn to seeking a certain coherence beneath them. The originality of his approach lies in its interrelated emphasis on how these contradictions "dramatize the writer's relationship to his own claims on or against his writing" (p. 96), hence the title of Chapter Four, "Anger and Authorship in Rousseau" (emphasis added). Unlike Voltaire and other *philosophes*, Rousseau lacked any form of institutional respectability, so he based his authorial persona on his marginality, his independence from all forms of social recognition. Coleman provides an illuminating account of the many ways in which Rousseau's awareness of his marginal status, the possible effects of his interventions, and his duties as a citizen of Geneva, led him to make the emotional dimension of his relationship to his readers an explicit concern in his attempts to establish a position of cultural authority for himself. Coleman's knowledge of all Rousseau's *oeuvre*, from the autobiographical to the political works and the *Lettre à D'Alembert* (his brilliant reading of this text is the highlight of Chapter Four), and from his great epistolary novel *Julie: ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* to *Émile*, his great treatise on education, enables Coleman to consider these texts synthetically and to bring out the many subtle connections in the treatment of anger and gratitude in these rhetorically complex texts. His focus on Rousseau's acute awareness of his rhetorical situation, of the risks that he was taking by trying to speak the truth, even enables him (in Chapter Five, "Rousseau's Quarrel with Gratitude") to cast new light on subjects about

which one might not have thought that anything new could be said, such as the notion of pity or the nature of the social contract.

The book concludes with a chapter on Diderot's ironic and sometimes virulently angry satire, *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Coleman makes a plausible argument for thinking about this imaginary dialogue between the respectable philosopher Diderot (*Moi*) and the cynical parasite Jean-François Rameau (*Lui*) as both an extension of Rousseau's analyses of how anger could turn into resentment and a pre-Romantic reflection on the problematic of gratitude. In this context, it is somewhat surprising to find no references to Hegel's classic discussion of *Le Neveu de Rameau* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. On a more general level, I also found myself wondering whether a study of anger and gratitude in "the Enlightenment writer" might not have looked somewhat different if it had not been limited to French examples. These are, however, minor quibbles with a rich and important book.

NOTE

[1] For example, in *Looking for Spinoza* (Harcourt, 2003).

Jay Caplan
Amherst College
jlcaplan@amherst.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172