

**Christian Plantin, *Les bonnes raisons des émotions*.** Bern/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011, 305 pp, ISBN 978-3-0343-0602-7, € 76 (paperback).

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### **1. Introduction**

Christian Plantin has studied the relationship between emotion and argumentation for over ten years now. In the monograph *Les bonnes raisons des émotions* (2011), the methodology that resulted from this extensive scrutiny, along with its theoretical and philosophical choices, are brought together. The announced purpose is to give shape to a systematic basis for approaching “emotional discourse.”

The task undertaken is complex and the subject as old as it is unsettled. Moreover, up to the present day, a positivist suspicion soars above every effort to place subjectivity on the list of scientific “hard facts.” If there are such things as emotions “out there,” humanities departments have yet to find the right tools to identify them and investigate their properties. Perhaps the most one may hope for is a valid reduction of emotion to behavior, that is, a principled theory of inference from human conduct to ascribed emotional states. Such reductions are preformed regularly in psychology and sociology and, nowadays, need not involve the assumption that the observable reaction to environmental stimulus is all there is to it.<sup>1</sup>

However, upon entering the realm of linguistic behavior with the aim of studying emotions, new difficulties arise. First, the path bifurcates. Aside

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the classical study of Averill (1988). Natural sciences are exceptional in this regard for they need to perform the reduction in order for emotions to lend themselves to quantitative empirical study (e.g. Blanchard & Blanchard, 1988).

from what can be ascribed to participants by an observer—e.g. this speaker is nervous, this politician hostile—one finds emotions being referred to by the participants themselves, either explicitly or implicitly. Thus, the first complication arises: not only the analyst but speakers themselves can genuinely ascribe emotion to one another through linguistic interaction. When the analyst discovers that language users are very much acquainted with the “emotion rules” of various language games, the entire analytic endeavor is compromised. That is because speakers might fake nervousness, or the politician might *act so as to seem* hostile. Further, a sophisticated speaker might cleverly fake a discoverable version of nervousness or even fake such faking and so on. The study of emotions via linguistic behavior has yet to find a cure for what is, in principle, an *ad infinitum* possibility of misattribution.

However, these complications are relevant only for those who undertake a psychologically-informed approach to the study of emotion. Plantin is not among them. As an argumentation theorist, he is interested in the manner in which language users exploit each other’s knowledge of emotion, and negotiate this knowledge through discourse. As he notes early on, the task “is not a matter of psychology [...] not a matter of saying what anger or calm are, but to see how one builds a discourse capable of making angry or calming” (p. 25). Thus, the focus is on the way emotions are made relevant to the argumentative purposes of speakers.

## 2. Overview

The book opens with a chapter on the available French vocabulary for referring to emotional discourse. The French language appears to be very generous in this respect. Plantin notes that the difference between various terms such as *émotion*, *affect*, *sentiment*, *éprouvé* is not so much a matter of grammatical derivability or semantic content, but of context-based connotation. Some terms emphasize the physiological aspect of being moved (e.g. *émotion*), others the cognitive aspect (e.g. *sentiment*). This is noticeable, also in English, when the noun is modified into an adjective: an *emotional* speech is different from a *sentimental* one even though emotion and sentiment might be used with the same reference. As a consequence of

such diversity, Plantin is led to the conclusion that only the entire family of words can “cover” the field for all theoretical purposes. Although Plantin’s survey is no doubt interesting, one could question its relevance for the present purpose. After all, it is not only expectable for natural language to be vague and heterogeneous; the analyst can also always resort to the use of technical language. One might thus decide to bring this technical language as close as possible to the natural one, but that hardly ever happens in this book. Consequently, a report on how this connection could *not* be brought about is strictly speaking immaterial to the analytical purposes Plantin seeks to achieve.

The next six chapters offer a broad historical account of various treatments of emotional discourse. Plantin begins with the Aristotelian distinction between *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. He notes that the three were conceived as separate aspects of rhetorical discourse but that, as rhetorical theory approached modernity, the line between the three elements began to be drawn with *ethos* and *pathos* on the one side and *logos* on the other. The distinction eventually appeared somewhat indisputable to the modern mind: the first two act on the will, the passions, the heart, while the latter acts on the representation, the spirit, the mind; the first two persuade, the third convinces.

The classical treatment, comprising not only Aristotle but also Cicero and Quintilian, remains the first attempt to methodically place emotion within a study of rhetorical choice. *Pathos*, in particular, was further categorized into “conceptual couples” (shame/impudence, friendship/hatred etc.) and each were explained in terms of what Plantin calls “emotional scripts” (p. 23). The example of *shame* is given: for Aristotle, shame is the feeling aroused by a situation in which someone has a weakness and, against his or her will, this weakness is displayed publicly. In this view, the task of the speaker consisted in modeling events after the chosen emotional pattern, with the purpose of arousing the corresponding sentiment. Plantin notices the important methodological shift this perspective implies, from the internal states of mind to the emotions-so-described by the externalized discourse. It is these basic precepts that Plantin translate into the contemporary vocabulary of argumentation theory.

The historical development from the sixteenth century British empiricists to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric* may be (grossly) sim-

plified as follows. Emotions “disorganize” what rationality organizes; they interfere with one’s critical abilities and make one prone to bad decisions, bad arguments—arguments that deceive others and oneself. In short, as Plantin summarizes this Cartesian tradition, emotions lead to bad, that is to say *unscientific*, judgment.

For a theory that is more rhetorically oriented, the above poses not so much a problem but rather provides a resourceful starting point to start searching for rhetorical tactics and strategies. Those who seek effectiveness will generally look for ways to exploit the status of emotion in linguistic interaction. However, for a normatively-oriented theorist, emotion is approached from the opposite viewpoint: the task of the critical analyst is to take emotion out of discourse, to build a critical apparatus that would eventually leave rationality unstrained. As Plantin rightfully puts it, according to these theories emotion is “the mother of all fallacies” (p. 1). Both *ethos* and *pathos* can eventually disrupt a reasonable exchange of views and specific labels have been used to pinpoint precisely that, e.g., *ad verecundiam*, *ad misericordiam*. Thus, it remains the job of the contemporary critical analyst to make sure such disruption can be detected with proper—i.e. emotion-free—theoretical tools.

The next three chapters prepare the way for the studies with which Plantin closes the monograph, exemplifying the kind of analysis he has in mind. The methodology rests on the following distinctions. First, there is a distinction between *emotive* and *emotional* communication (pp. 139-142). Briefly put, while emotive communication is intentional and implies conscious choices of linguistic as well as non-linguistic behavior, emotional communication is unintentional and escapes the active choices of subjects: “Thus, in linguistic activity, the intentional, communicational and strategic use of emotions is opposed to the emotional outburst—an outburst which can occur in any other type of activity. Controlled emotion is opposed to experienced emotion” (p. 140).

Little is said about the tools for keeping these two poles apart and, as we will see, the distinction is unfortunately not further clarified by its applications in the case studies to follow. All the more, Plantin recognizes that the *intentional* expression of *emotional* discourse—thus, something which would go against his stipulation—is not only a logical possibility but a very

common strategy (p. 141). Thus, the question whether a clean separation between the emotional and the non-emotional is possible remains unanswered.

Plantin distinguishes three “ways” (fr. *voies*) of “reaching” emotion: (1) via what is explicitly mentioned, (2) via a described situation (the “script”-function mentioned above) and (3) via behavioral manifestations. In the last two cases, the analyst’s access to emotion is indirect, and the emotion thus-reconstructed is inferred. Plantin treats these three ways independently. Each is subjected to further sub-categorization, intended to yield a fully-fledged analytical tool. For instance, when emotion is explicitly referred to, Plantin proposes to define the *emotional speech act* (pp. 146-150) as combining a “term of emotion” (which can be a noun or a verb, e.g. *x suffers* or *x is in pain*), a “place of emotion” (the subject experiencing the emotional state), and a “source of emotion” (not the stimulus, but the communicatively-built “script” in question).

Finally Plantin reviews extant literature on the rhetorical production of emotion as well as the accompanying linguistic tools to analyze it (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1980, 2000; Caffi and Janney, 1994; Ungerer, 1997). However, it is not immediately clear to what extent Plantin commits himself to these approaches. He takes note of their benefits as well as their drawbacks, the most obvious one being that what produces some emotion in one audience might not do so in even a slightly different situation. As is well known, theories in the tradition of *rhetorica docens* provide prescriptive rules for moving one’s audience. However, as Plantin duly notices (p. 167), these kinds of rules should always be taken with a grain of salt, for how can something as general as “Find (emotional) analogies!” not be qualified in view of contextual markers?

Surprisingly, the theoretical and methodological contribution stops here. The reader is now only somewhat acquainted with possible solutions to several of the analytical problems concerning the study of emotion. Plantin has avoided many unnecessary troubles related to a psychological approach to emotions, but an approach taking externalized speech as a point of departure has its own specific difficulties which must be met (see below). To sum up, taking linguistic commitment as a starting point, one dodges the problem of what is beyond, but that hardly spells success.

### 3. Defending an analysis of emotional discourse

I will use two of the studies from the last part of the book in order to illustrate my criticisms. Before I do that, however, I should like to make two remarks on the collection as a whole. First, the studies exhibit a variety to the point that no two studies are quite alike; in each study the author takes new (and somewhat different) analytical steps. The reader eventually has the impression that these investigations were produced at different moments throughout the development of Plantin's approach—which could explain the lack of uniformity. But even then one would expect to recognize an underlying, unifying analytical goal. Certainly, what might prove to be relevant for the analysis of, e.g. *fear*, in the second study, need not be so in the reconstruction of *anger* in the fifth. Thus, although one may expect a certain degree of heterogeneity owed to the situations being dissimilar, Plantin's studies rather resemble a collection of interesting thoughts and insights on the subject at hand.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, readers may miss a meta-discussion. One consequence of this non-reflexive manner of examination is that the theoretical reasons behind the analysis are rarely clear. To give an example, a study about the combination of *fear* and *optimism* in an article about depopulated French villages is organized as follows: (1) name the main emotion (here: fear), (2) provide statements oriented towards this emotion, (3) list how the emotion is “constructed,” namely via negated verbs, morphemes such as “de-” (e.g. *depopulate*) and verbs that are labeled as “negative” (to be abandoned, to be lost, etc.), (4) list answers to topical questions which can be extracted from the text (e.g. What? How many? How? When?), (5) end with the claim that “*the fundamental processes of constructing emotion are exemplified very effectively in this text which, from the title [La France du vide: les chiffres qui font peur], announces its emotional color*” (p. 211). Despite the fact that each is insightful, these analytical steps do not really connect with another and so cannot, progressively, lead to a conclusion.

To different degrees, the issues outlined above apply to each of the seven studies. The more important aspects can perhaps better be observed in individual studies, and may be formulated as follows: It is not the lack of theoretical precision that undermines the following two studies, but that

*doubt* is not anticipated. Thus, critical readers will often fail to grasp why the analyses should be accepted. Rarely does Plantin stop to build a defense against potential objections. Below, I have chosen the first and the fifth studies entitled *Publier son émotion—et partir sans payer* and *La rage impuissante: Maudire le gouvernement*, respectively. These two stand out, being more elaborated than others.

The text analyzed in the first study is a letter to the editor, entitled *A bitter taste* [fr. *Goût amer*] which appeared in *Telegrama* in September 2002. It refers to the decision of the French government to extradite the Italian member of *Unione dei Comunisti Combattenti*, Paolo Persichetti. The decision came after more than 20 years of offering Persichetti not only political asylum, but also a teaching position in a French university as well as other benefits. The author exclaims:

Shame on France, shame for France who gives her word only to come back and revise it. The tortious extradition of Persichetti on a Sunday morning in August leaves one with a bitter taste.

Plantin starts from the idea that the letter attempts to “justify” (p. 198) an emotional state, given collectively by the triplet “fury/shame/bitterness”. He identifies techniques of “discourse and a counter-discourse” (ibid.). The official story of Persichetti being a terrorist constitutes the first level, which is refuted strategically at a second level by the use of linguistic devices, e.g. quotation marks: “A ‘terrorist’ sentenced for twenty years ...” (p. 199.). Then, at a third level, Plantin identifies a reply by the Government which is reconstructed as follows: “Maybe he was accused unjustly, yes, but whatever the case, he can prove his innocence in Italy” (ibid.). At yet a fourth level, Plantin identifies an attempt by the author of the letter to refute this possible defense by pointing to the example of Toni Negri, who was in the same situation and is still in prison awaiting a fair trial.

The division into levels appears *ad hoc* because no motivated typology (or theory) of “levels” is offered. To show that it is *ad hoc*, let me add two more possible levels: the Government’s reply to the claims on the fourth level, for instance, (5) “It is perfectly acceptable to offer a refugee governmental subsidy as a professor and then extradite him”, and the author’s response to the fifth level, (6) “You should not accept to deliver him as a

terrorist to his home country after you treated him with diplomas and a salary.” This division would be instrumental for a better understanding of the text only if it were supported by a clear set of criteria for identifying levels or layers of discourse. Otherwise, these observations appear to run counter to the expressed goal of following “principles and method” in the study of emotion.

Second, even when one assumes that the reconstruction would be clear and justified, it is unclear in what sense this division helps in the analysis of the three emotions which are the focus of the text. Plantin’s four levels are not mentioned in the rest of the study. Finally, in the very last paragraph of the study, Plantin appears to introduce another (possible) counter-discourse, attributed to someone disagreeing with the letter: “Italy is a democratic country, member of the European Union. It would be a true aggression on the part of France to attempt to fill in for the Italian justice” (p. 203).

The study continues with a threefold division of shame, and an analysis of the “complex sentiment” of rage and shame felt by the author of the letter, followed by a short paragraph on an enthymeme that is identified in the last sentence of the text. The shame is thus divided into “expressed” (shame on France), “made” (If one gives one’s word and then does not do as promised) and “betrayed by behavior” (the extradition took place ‘tortiously’, ‘on a Sunday morning’ as if away from public sight). The complex sentiments experienced by the author are identified as: shame (because she was also French), rage (because of the scenario that took place), and bitterness (because there was not much to be done at that point). These two threefold divisions are laid out in three pages with little additional explanation than is here provided in brackets.

The lists and divisions do little to exemplify “principles and methods for the study of argumentation,” as the subtitle announced. One might assume that a reader doubts that Plantin correctly attributes the use of three types of shame. This reader may only see one type of shame—that which someone acting immoral should experience—which is then justified in two ways: what has been done (not keeping one’s word), and how it has been done (after 20 years, on a Sunday morning, etc.). The first branch of Plantin’s division, in this case, would be considered a mere announcement of the confrontation at hand.

I am not claiming, of course, that my admittedly *ad hoc* reply is on a par with Plantin's analysis. Rather, the idea behind my reply is to show the effects of not offering any justification: Plantin's investigation is thus *open to these kinds of replies* in which any critical remark could, in principle, be placed on an equal footing.

The second study is based on a more elaborate text. Here, we have a clear image of how Plantin avoids an internalistic approach to emotions. The text is a letter to the president of a French university in which an anger-script is clearly present: the author of the letter, a professor at the same university, is writing to describe rather unpleasant events which took place at the restaurant with which the university has a collaboration contract. The underlying standpoint seems to be a demand that the university president boycott (p. 241) the relationship with the restaurant. The author describes how the customers had to wait for a long time, how one of them had finished his meal while others had not received theirs, how they were treated impolitely and, at the end, one of them was made the subject of a clearly xenophobic remark. All in all, the author makes a compelling case by presenting these facts which, if true, cannot but lead to a negative assessment of the restaurant in question.

Plantin shows how the author tries to transmit the emotions (anger, indignation) to the other party so as to make the boycotting decision reasonable. The analysis focuses on several rhetorical strategies by which this goal is pursued: e.g. the setting of the whole scenario into a state of calm and routine (as if everything was expected to go as usual) or the subtle rise of negative feelings from "light uneasiness" concerning the waiting time to the exasperation of being verbally aggressed. The critical question I would like to formulate with respect to this analysis is as follows: Why does one need a separate approach to emotions and emotion-building in order to make sense of the argumentative goals of this text? What I doubt, then, is the added-value of identifying an emotion, e.g. *anger*, as a vaguely defined "rhetorical construct" used in support of the standpoint. If one can indeed reconstruct a justification relation between emotion and the overall goal of the text, why not simply view everything in "classic" argument-standpoint relations? One might end up with a reconstruction which on the main level might look like:

(1) We should not collaborate with this restaurant anymore because (1.1.) what happened last time made us angry and (1.1') we should not collaborate with restaurants that make us angry.

Thus, if the author intends the emotion to increase the acceptability of the overall standpoint, is saying “The author is rhetorically making the anger-script evident, so as to support *x*” more enlightening than “The author is rhetorically using events *m*, *n*, *p* as arguments to support *x*”? Judging by the special position he ascribes to emotions, I doubt that Plantin would agree with the suggestion that the above two expressions are near-equivalents. However, the positive consequences of his analytical choice, together with the abovementioned preference, should be made much clearer.

#### **4. Evaluation**

Christian Plantin has taken some serious steps towards an integration of the study of emotion into the study of argumentation. However, Plantin’s endeavor remains less instructive than it could be. I have tried to show how, lacking a clear analytical apparatus, the results of Plantin’s analyses are subject to rather basic critical remarks. These remarks do not seem to be anticipated and, hence, his studies appear to be little more than notes on the strategic use of emotion organized around the theme set by the particular text chosen. An analogous comment could be put forward with respect to the historical overview which takes up the greater part of the book. Plantin is clearly discerning classical positions with respect to emotion, but the historical effort does not by itself settle the question of relevance, viz., how are these past accounts relevant for the contemporary scholar studying emotion?

Methodological uncertainty incurs critical questions in yet another way. When studying both the historical overview and the theoretical apparatus together with the examples, the reader wonders why emotions are placed in the special position that Plantin assigns to them. If the author argues for the standpoint that the reader should feel a certain emotion, then how is this different from any other prescriptive standpoint? Similarly, concerning the frames or scripts which govern the production of emotion via lin-

guistic behavior, Plantin does not explain how they are different from any other frame or script exploited in discourse (see examples in Brown and Yule, 1983, pp. 236-245). After all, if frames or scripts are not different, one has to ask why a special methodology would be required? Without a precise answer to this question, one might just as well establish special methodologies for the analysis of political values, or scientific evidence, or moral evaluation or any other area of discourse. An atomism of this kind, or so I believe, appears rather undesirable.

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