Chapter 2

Feeling Rage: The Transformation of the Concept of Anger in Eighteenth Century Germany

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During the second half of the eighteenth century in Germany, the concepts of the emotions of anger and rage (Zorn and Wut) are subjected to an epochal discursive transformation. The crucial event is the replacement of anger as an emotion (Affekt) by rage as a feeling (Gefühl). The present paper will be explaining this process of transformation.¹

In his Art of Rhetoric, Aristotle defines anger (Zorn, in German translations) based on a formula of “slight—pain—revenge” which has remained valid for centuries: ‘Let us then define anger as a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved.’² Anger is a social event; this is a fact essential to the entire discourse of anger in classical antiquity, and, accordingly, the term ‘slight’ (ολιγωριο) is pivotal to Aristotle’s description.³ His focus on the principle that connects pain to disregard and, finally, to a lusty desire for revenge, suggests a twofold social determination. Firstly, the slight one has suffered causes a pain which will then provoke anger, as it is considered either to be ‘undeserved’ or has been emitted by a subject who in one’s own opinion does not have the merit to do so.⁴ In this case, anger signifies the impulse to seek revenge for an inappropriate social slight. Secondly, and this is the other aspect of social determination, anger is always born out of one’s own hypostatized superiority. I believe the decisive sentence in Aristotle’s theory on

¹ My paper gives an abbreviated and condensed version of chapters IV and V from my book: Lehmann J.F., Im Abgrund der Wut. Zur Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte der Wut (Freiburg i. Br.: 2012) 131–190. In the present paper, “anger” will be used whenever it indicates “Zorn”, while “rage” will be standing for “Wut” in the German sense. For the translation I have to thank Silke Mestern.
³ Aristotle, The Art of Rhetoric 175, mentions three forms of disregard: ‘disdain, spitefulness, and insult.’
anger is the observation that a person displays anger because of ‘her superior rank’.\(^5\)

The principle of “slight—pain—revenge” is repeated by other antique authors, albeit in different variations, either explicitly (in theoretical writings) or implicitly (in the narrated examples), as in Cicero and Plutarch,\(^6\) or as in Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. Zeno is reported to have said: ‘anger [is] a craving or desire to punish one who is thought to have done you an undeserved injury.’\(^7\) Seneca\(^8\) claims nearness to Aristotle, and even though his Stoic view on anger differs considerably from the Aristotelian viewpoint, both authors do coincide in that they emphasise the link of honour and revenge as the main element in the basic narrative of anger.\(^9\) In the Middle Ages, anger continues to be the emotion (\textit{Affekt}) of revenge. Leaning strongly on Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas explains in his \textit{Summa theologica} how ‘an angry reaction arises only when one has endured some pain, and desires and hopes for revenge.’\(^10\) Authors from the early modern period up to the eighteenth century,


\(^9\) The differences mainly concern the appraisal of the committed insult of honour. The Stoics take the insult as an internal challenge, denying it could be a legitimate trigger for anger, as only lowly beings allow themselves to feel anger if their honour is slighted. Thereby, the interconnection of slight of honour and an irate desire for revenge is confirmed even in the attempt of dissolving it.