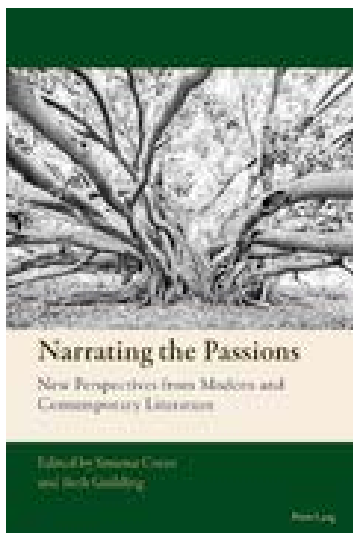


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**Claudia Cao**

**Narrating the Passions. New Perspectives from Modern and Contemporary Literature**

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Since ancient times, the passions have been conceived as opposed to reason, to the possibility of lucid understanding and self-control. However, as “mimed languages or expressive acts that process and transmit [...] messages” (Remo Bodei, *Geometria delle passioni. Paura, speranza, felicità: filosofia e uso politico*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1991, 8, my translation), we can consider them accomplices of reason in the process of cognition and understanding of reality.

This is one of the main points of the volume edited by Simona Corso and Beth Guilding, which, through a comparative approach that includes a broad spectrum of theoretical perspectives and case studies, offers a rich overview of the debate around the different passions, their contribution to our comprehension of reality, their literary representation, and their role in authorial poetics.

Originating from the lectures and workshops of the European School for Comparative Studies “Synapsis”, this volume is dedicated to one of its founders, Remo Ceserani, and be-

longs to the New Comparative Criticism series edited by Florian Mussgnug. The volume is divided into fourteen chapters and is introduced by a broad theoretical excursus by Simona Corso. Starting from the Platonic and Aristotelian reflections on the passions to reach the moral philosophers, contemporary philosophy, and psychology, the editor highlights some distinctions between passions and emotions and outlines the prevalence in the modern age of the second term over the first, gradually perceived as obsolete, due in part to the influence of Christian theology.

The contributions deal with some case studies taken from modern and contemporary European literary production, among which it is possible to find points of intersection, especially around the metaliterary approach. A quick scan of the table of contents reveals the richness of nuances conferred to the theme of the passions, among which we find love, parental passions, voyeurism, seduction, gambling, and indignation.

Romantic love is investigated through a wide range of analytical perspectives: Janet Todd's essay focuses on the romance of *Pride and Prejudice*, read as the inauguration of the modern literary tradition, and it highlights the novel's influences on the twentieth-century romance genre. Sophie Corser likewise focuses on romantic love, stressing the link between the theme of passion and metatextual reflection. According to Corser, *Swann in Love* and *A Room with a View* are in fact united by the centrality of motifs such as reading, writing, truth and falsity in human relationships. Metaliterary issues also criss-cross Massimo Fusillo's essay, which deals with the theme of seduction in *Les liaisons dangereuses*. After having inserted it into a wider panorama on the theme – starting from classical mythology and arriving at the novel and the cinema – he emphasises the rhetorical strategies and points of contact with the interpretative act. The author-reader relationship and the reflection on authorial poetry, based on the treatment of the passions, are at the centre of Annalisa Lombardi's essay on the works by Agota Kristof and Herta Müller. The objects of her study are the "specific stylistic procedures [...] employed to contain pathos" (204), their "poetics of dispassion" read in relation to the experience of migration and "linguistic estrangement" (209) and interpreted as a strategy to safeguard the authenticity of emotions, to cope with the impossibility of words to speak the truth.

The link between passion and literary genre adopted by Todd returns as a critical-theoretical basis in Enrica Villari's contribution, which explores the works of Sir Walter Scott and the developing nineteenth-century historical novel with special attention to the centrality of emotions in the cognitive process, as a legacy of the romantic revolution as opposed to the founding principles of modern science. Another sentimental bond is that investigated by Simona Micali in her essay "The Object of Passions", which analyses the relationship between the character of Kemal and the author Pamuk in the work *Museum of Innocence*. In this novel it is possible to find various declinations of love – from impossible love to the triumph of love over adversity – creating a specular relationship between the visitor of the museum and the reader of the novel, between the role of the museum and the feeling of love.

Gianna Zocco's chapter investigates the desire of the other, this time through the motifs of the window and of voyeurism: using Lacan's theory of the gaze, the author raises a number of questions about the real role of the subject and the object in the act of looking,

leading the reader to the conclusion that looking at others is “an important way of approaching incomprehensible, unknown aspects of [one]self” (113).

The parent-child relationship is examined by Dame Gillian Beer after an *excursus* between modern and contemporary writers: she begins by examining the “hidden” feelings behind the typical conception of parental protectiveness, illustrating how such instinctive guardianship can transform into possessiveness and the “passion of repudiation”.

Among the genres and artistic forms addressed there is also the theatre, especially in Laura Caretti’s rich study on *Hamlet* performances. After an introduction on the artistic representation of the passions, the contribution focuses on the change over time in both actors’ and directors’ interpretation of the character of Ophelia, marking a turning point in the discussion between Craig and Stanislavski in 1912, which influenced the representation of Ophelia’s inner life and her emotional participation in the tragedy.

Tchehoff examines an altogether different sort of passion than those centering around the desire for the other: the passion for gambling. Through the combination of Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler* and Matilde Serao’s *The Land of Cockayne*, he highlights the complementary perspectives on the theme and the originality compared to previous novels on the subject. He also remarks on the peripherality shared by the two societies in which these novels are set, which influences the perception of gambling as an emblem of speed and rapid creation and destruction of values and fortunes.

The volume also explores other passions, like indignation, central in Simona Corso’s examination of Philip Roth’s novels: defining this feeling as a catalyst for the “innate and instinctive sense of justice” but also “the quickest road towards violence” (227), the scholar finds in indignation the reflection of a noble and non-servile soul, a sign of a search for meaning that knows no end.

The common thread of childhood unites the works of Danila Cannamela, Beth Guilding, and Amelia Worsley through different shades of meaning and methodological perspectives. In Cannamela’s work, the reflection on authorial poetics returns: Corazzini’s regression into infantile passion is read in light of the nineteenth-century literary heritage to highlight its reworking of tradition. Focusing on the motif of the child’s crying, this essay emphasises the role of the child “as a saboteur of the logical status quo” (174) who “destabilizes the celebratory poetic tradition, introducing a prelogical modernist language” (174). The meaning of childhood, this time understood as “the meaning of life” (177), recurs in Beth Guilding’s study, which ranges from the thought of Barthes to that of Blanchot, Borges, Freud, and Heidegger to explore the voice of the poet understood as the inner voice of the child who cries out from within.

The psychoanalytic perspective is also present in Amelia Worsley’s essay on Winnicott, where she re-evaluates the emotions deriving from the parent-child relationship. In particular, she rejects the reading of loneliness as “inability to connect with others” (196) and enhances the importance of “silence as an important form of communication and a way of creating a relationship that encourages trust, despite at first seeming to encourage distance” (198).

By putting the ancient and modern classics in dialogue with contemporary artistic production, through a wide range of literary forms and genres and within the rich frame of

the philosophical and theoretical debate on passions, *Narrating the Passions* draws attention to stylistic, thematic and narratological aspects of the theme as well as to its function in the economy of the work and in the authorial poetics. It offers important literary perspectives to those who want to deepen and extend the debate on the theme to other literatures and arts, but also to those who are interested in the study of the single authors and in the methodological approaches proposed.

**Claudia Cao** is an Honorary Fellow in Comparative Literature at the University of Cagliari. During her PhD she worked on rewritings of *Great Expectations*, also publishing the book *Le riscritture di Great Expectations. Sei letture del classico dickensiano* (Mimesis 2016). As a Research Fellow, she took part in the research project "Sisters and sisterhood in literature and other arts", publishing the book *Sorellanze nella narrativa inglese tra le due guerre* (Morellini 2018).

[cao.claudiac@gmail.com](mailto:cao.claudiac@gmail.com)