

Tears in Preprint. The "Diary of a Father" in a German Family Magazine of the 1870s

by Nina Verheyen

The historical research of emotions is not fixed to any particular source-corpus: they can work with self-help literature as well as, for example, periodicals, diaries, scientific dissertations or more. As such it is important, on the one hand, to distinguish between these types of documents and "genres". In the end each has their own genre guidelines. Accordingly it makes a difference, if the love of a mother for her children is alleged by an education specialist in a self-help book, by a journalist in a family illustration magazine, illuminated introspectively by a middle-class woman via her diary, or examined by a psychologist in a professional article. On the other hand, the boundaries between these genres are not always clear and different genres can overlap in a source. This formal hybridity should then not be dismissed, but instead included therein. Thus the following article will show a new perspective of historical (emotional) research by means of a source from the journal *Die Gartenlaube* (The Arbour).

The family magazine *Die Gartenlaube*, a journal published since the 1850s in Leipzig, was keenly received by middle-class circles and was likewise advertised to their set of values. The chosen source was published there in 1875, it is a commented preprint from the book *Das Kind. Tagebuch eines Vaters* (The Child. Diary of a Father), which was published a year later in Leipzig.[1] The author of this book was the writer and teacher Herman Semmig (1820–1897), whose name, however, was not specified in *Die Gartenlaube*. The annotated preprint likewise did not name an author, however, a footnote at the end of the heading referred to the underlying publication. This publication was - by account of the author himself - a slightly shortened journal, which Semmig had completed after the birth of his child, and whereby he wanted to contribute both to the scientific understanding of early childhood development and to the tutoring of parents. His manuscript thus locates at the interface of a journal, a scientific dissertation and self-help literature, which is also why these three texts intersect each other in the annotated preprint. At the same time it was also a newspaper article, as the *Tagebuch eines Vaters* was not only printed in extracts, but commented with an introduction.

Formally, the source is thus quite a hybrid. Content wise, however, the continuity of a particular theme is highlighted: feelings. It pulls itself through the entire newspaper article like a golden thread. Already in the introductory comments it was pointed out that the publication of the book was referencing an alleged social deficit. As it read, the bodily and spiritual development of a child is a wonder, but parents were often not devoting enough attention to the "awakening life of the child" and "many thousands" would even "pass the children's world cold and impassively." [2] *Die Gartenlaube* reprimanded thus the insufficient interest in the development of children, stated an associated emotional impoverishment and praised the *Tagebuch eines Vaters* as an antidote.

Subsequent printouts of chosen excerpts from the book were to follow, at first from the foreword. There the author explained his ad hoc decision, after the birth, to write a journal about the development steps of the infant, as well as the later decision to publish this in an abbreviated form. He hoped that the journal "could have stimulating effects on others." [3] On the one hand, "the therein contained experiences and sentiments [are] of such a general human nature [...], that they could be experienced and felt by any other," although these feelings are not made consciously by all. On the other hand, the development of the depicted child had taken "a natural course." The readership will therefore not become confused by something "too personal" and can in any case "scroll through the whole gamut of emotions and again find, in the narrow context of family life, a picture of aspiration and struggle." [4] Semmig thus conceptualizes the journal as a study of the development of the cognitive and physical – and equally implied emotional – development of a child and he hoped alternatively to allow the reader to share the lecture in the larger breadth of the "gamut of emotions," which he connected with the development of a child.

Whom he wished for as an audience becomes clear in the extensive dedication, which is also found in the foreword. Semmig dedicated his book to "all thinkers," who he hoped were interested in children, to the mothers, with whom rest the responsibility of actual child care, and to their spouses. But he also dedicated the book to childless women, who he wanted to prepare for their decision, and finally – ultimately and personally – to his own wife. In the "pledge" of her love, he was gifted "the greatest, sweetest happiness [...], that a person on Earth can feel, which alone fills us like the idea of pure heavenly bliss, the happiness, to name a child my own." [5] Striking of this representation is a hierarchization of marital and parental happiness. The love between husband and wife appeared to be of intrinsic worth, but also as a means to an end, namely to find a still larger happiness and a still "higher" feeling: having one's own child. The teleological notion of a "gamut of emotions," which the child would go through, paired itself with the religious



© "Die Gartenlaube", 1875

thoughts to transcend the earthly qua feeling and to quasi-experience the "idea of heavenly bliss." The feelings, and more specifically the *parental* feelings, became sacred.

Considering the religious upgrading of parental emotions it is, therefore, not surprising that emotions were also omnipresent in the "eight diary sheets", which were subsequently published following the excerpts from the foreword.[6] Each starting with a hyphen, impressions of the child's development were sketched in a few sentences as well as portrayals of the parent-child relationship. Semmig's attention in this respect validated mostly the mother, for example the "mother's bosom," "mother's milk," and "mother's love." Furthermore, he also addressed his own feelings and the emotional development of the child. Regarding the second week of the infant's life, it was said for example:

"The small body really has already grown. And the mind? It still seems to notice nothing. But it seems from time to time as if it observed, noticed something. As now, most certainly – the baby moved his mouth so sweetly, pleasantly; yes, it smiled. It was only a gleam, a whiff, but certainly, it was a smile. And now it is screaming again – it is a long time coming, a mercilessly long time, before it is being assuaged and while you assuage it, it still takes it too long; it cries for mercy. And see what fizzes there in the corner of its eyes? No, it is none other, surely, it is a tear. It is small, very tiny, barely as large as a pinhead, but I tasted the bitter salt – I sipped its first tear. First smile! First Tear! What gush of emotions will flow from these fonts?"[7]

Was the infant actually crying out of anger due to the withheld milk and did the father really "drink" the infant's first tears from his face? First, this question cannot be answered and secondly, it is the wrong question to ask, as it points to a *descriptive, quasi-documental* reading of a source: It is questioned and, at the same time, doubted as a witness of emotions. Thus the analysis is orientating itself towards an idea of the journal as an authentic testimony of individual emotions and at the same time charging it with the possibility of falsification. Semmig could have white-washed, dramatized, somehow invented or simply been mistaken. Admittedly, this doubt appears plausible. Already the middle classes of the 19th century considered a journal as a place where an authentic description of individual emotions should normatively take place, without nevertheless ever regarding the individual writing as completely trustworthy. But historical science should not simply accept and perpetuate this description from journals as a mirror and distorting mirror of emotions, but rather challenge this perspective and historicize it.

As current debates in diverse sciences show, feelings are not a solid anthropological substance that lie within the individual and are then outwardly expressed in a second culturally marked step, more or less 'authentic,' and then rendered describable. Rather, emotions are scarcely separable from cognitive operations, and are moreover consistently in motion. They crystalize in emotional expression as well as purposeful reflections about emotions; likewise they change through these processes or even first arise from them.[8] If Semmig wrote about his feelings in his journal, then he was not only depicting them, rather he was addressing them, quasi rendering them conscious and modifying them in this manner, though with an uncertain result. Thus it could be, that Semmig intensified his love for his infant through the composition of his journal. But feelings are –according to the American historian William Reddy, who argues against constructive perspectives in historical emotional research –not entirely elastic and cannot easily performatively fabricated through the work on an emotion.[9]

Therefore, instead of the source being read and questioned as an illustration of emotions, it should be understood as a *communicative*, i.e. directed towards others, *reflexion about emotions*. Journals as a genre always contained a reflexive-communicative layer, as they firstly served the consideration of one's own actions and secondly, it was quite common in the 19th century to give journals to other people to read (for instance to parents, to a husband or wife, to friends or, later on, children). If Semmig constructed his journal as a mixture of intimate introspection, scientific analysis, and pedagogic advice and published it, he only pushed the opening of the potential audience one step further, namely beyond the people personally known to him. Next to the communicative-reflexive dimension, there was added a normative layer, which is what the comment of *Die Gartenlaube* underscored. As Semmig, the newspaper article targeted the appreciation of emotions, mainly in two respects: first, the text promoted a scientific analysis of childhood emotions, which concurrently intensified[10]; second – and this is particularly relevant in a gender history perspective – the contribution makes the case for a stronger valuation of parental love, especially by men.

Thus the source intervened into a contemporary debate about naturalized "gender characters", which interpreted the family as a sphere of emotions, separated from the public, and to which "the woman" was designated. The *Tagebuch eines Vaters* did not abolish this polarization, rather superimposed with the categories of particularity and universality. The author described himself as a middle-class man, who sought his fulfillment both in a profession and in the family, who was endowed both with a clear mind and a bountiful heart, and who most of all was in the position to link the two.[11] The transgression of gendered borders corresponds thus to the plea to transcend the border between the public and private, reason and emotion – mind you, without actually dismantling the border, because the transgression was a male privilege. This text, which transcended borders of genre, thus was the expression of middle-class men's claim to superiority and domination. This domination was based on dualistic figures of thought and, at the same time, it overcame them. It was domination by men that were ennobled by their access to the world of feelings as well as by their exclusive ability to rationalize these from "outside".

Further Literature

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[1] As above, "Die drei ersten Jahre des Kindes," *Die Gartenlaube – Illustriertes Familienblatt* (1875): 822-24. Dealing with an annotated preprint from: Herman Semmig, *Das Kind. Tagebuch eines Vaters* (Leipzig: H. Hartung u. Sohn, 1876); 2. ed.. 1876.

[2] All quotes "Die drei ersten Jahre des Kindes", 822.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. 823

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Fundamentally and particularly stimulating see Catherine Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions. Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll & Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), see for further references also Jan Plamper, *Geschichte und Gefühl. Grundlagen der Emotionsgeschichte* (Siedler: München, 2012).

[9] William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge u.a.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[10] Till Kössler, "Die Ordnung der Gefühle. Frühe Kinderpsychologie und das Problem kindlicher Emotionen (1880-1930)," in *Rationalisierungen des Gefühls. Zum Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Emotionen 1880-1930*, Daniel Morat and Uffa Jensen, eds. (München: Fink 2008), 189-210.

[11] See Martina Kessel, "The 'Whole Man'. The Longing for a Masculine World in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *Gender & History* 15 (2003): 1–31; Manuel Borutta and Nina Verheyen, "Vulkanier und Choleriker? Männlichkeit und Emotion in der deutschen Geschichte," in *Die Präsenz der Gefühle. Männlichkeit und Emotion in der Moderne*, idem, eds. (Bielefeld: Transkript, 2010), 11-39.

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