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Philip Fisher: The Vehement Passions

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INTRODUCTION

Could any pair of words seem as natural together as the words “dispassionate knowledge”? Yet in at least one case the passions were always understood to be essential to the search for knowledge. Descartes, in naming wonder the first of the passions, described wonder as an impassioned state that makes learning possible. In wonder we notice against the background of a lawful and familiar world something that strikes us by its novelty and by the pleasure that this surprising new fact brings to us. Each of us has at every stage of our lives a distinct but provisional horizon separating the familiar from the unknown and the unknowable. Any one experience of wonder informs us about the momentary location of this horizon line. The horizon line a red balloon reveals as it rises in the air before the eyes of a small child marks a different line from the one revealed when, as an adult astronomer, she sees for the first time in human history a pattern in the distribution of galaxies.

The passion of wonder has always been described by scientists and mathematicians as the heart of the experience of the search for new knowledge. At the same time, the very details of wonder might seem to rule out even more strongly any similar claim for anger, fear, grief, shame, and the other vehement passions. If it is only scientific knowledge that we are concerned with, then anger or mourning would seem to preclude clear thought, the pursuit of a continuous chain of thought and experiment, and the preservation of the calm atmosphere in which order and rationality make possible long and arduous projects.



As I hope to show in this book, wonder is not an exception. Each of the strong emotions or passions designs for us an intelligible world and does so by means of horizon lines that we can come to know only in experiences that begin with impassioned or vehement states within ourselves. The part played by wonder in scientific thought, both in the moment of attention that leads to a first discovery and in the final ordered knowledge that we call science, is played by anger in discovering or marking out for us unmistakably the contours of injustice and of unjust acts in certain moments of time. In this case as well, the concrete and ordered form that those local discoveries sponsored by anger lead to in the end is the nuanced legal system that is both codified and altered over time by newly discovered paths of anger and outrage, sometimes at individual acts that in their aftermath lead to new or stronger laws; at other times the outcome is the retraction of laws that in their workings lead to cases that arouse angry demands for redress.

That we are often surprised by wonder or surprised by anger is one clue to the fact that something new is disclosed to us in states of vehemence. The object's demand for attention that makes up one detail of wonder lets us see that we do not choose the objects we end up thinking about. Something, as we put it, catches our attention. Descartes describes how we find ourselves delighted, puzzled, and then drawn to pause and to think about what is new and strange to us.¹

Wonder is located at that promising line between what we already know—our familiar world—and all that it would be pointless to think about because we personally lack, or our historical moment as a whole lacks, the skills and framework of knowledge that would let us profitably spend time thinking here and now at this location. Wonder occurs at the horizon line of what is potentially knowable, but not yet known. We learn about this horizon line when we find ourselves in a state of wonder. Surprise has guided us to something where we can invest energy and time in a profitable way. The same is true for anger,

although it will take many chapters of this book to make plausible this claim about anger.

Scientific discovery and the demand for justice might seem, even if shown to be grounded in wonder and anger, to have saved these two vehement states at the expense of many others: distress (the Stoic's encompassing term that includes grief and mourning), shame, and, above all, fear. But in at least the case of fear, the deep and intrinsic connections between fear and aesthetic experience have been known in a restricted way since Aristotle's work on tragedy, where pity, fear, surprise, recognition, and suffering, along with a certain shudder of terror, were for the first time systematically described as states of pleasure. It is by means of the relations between fear and pity that a civic component enters into the highly self-centered and self-defining vehement states, and does so most clearly in the aesthetic experience of a spectator at a play or film, or the reader of a novel. An important parallel experience occurs in law courts where, as jurors, we are placed as observers and judges of opposed stories told by the prosecution and the defense about a set of events.

By using modern work in philosophy, economics, and game theory, I will develop a nuanced geography of fear with the goal of showing that in this case as well, the experience of extreme fear discloses, by means of a kind of horizon line found within the moment of experience itself, a necessary wealth of details that articulate an intelligible world. Here it will be the realms of aesthetics, storytelling, and, once again, the cases or stories told in courts of law that will be the domain of experience for fear that parallels the territory of wonder in science or the territory of anger within justice—both formal justice as we know it embodied in courts of law, judges, juries, prisons, and codes of statute law, and informal, everyday justice between neighbors or brothers or children who play together day after day in a city playground.

The uses of shame and grief I will not describe in advance except to say that, in combination with fear and anger, these two passions

announce to us the presence within ongoing life of the fact of mortality, and that they do so by marking the contours of the limited radius of our will by means of the injuries and humiliations of that will that are signaled to us by the moments when we find ourselves in a state of vehemence—that is, in an impassioned state. The workings of the passions will be my subject in the pages that follow, and not the problems posed by their excess. Nor will I be concerned with their trivial misuse, therapeutic irrationality, and prolonged fixity in those lives where anger or fear, shame or mourning might be excessive, fixed, arbitrary, and irrational. Instead, my concern will be the common sense of the vehement passions and just how the sensible mechanisms within the passions work within experience to map out the geography of an individual, intelligible world for each of us at every moment. The passions, as one of the longest uninterrupted, most intricate and necessary descriptive problems in the intellectual life of Western culture, have had time to accumulate waves of damage both from absent words and from the bad surplus of overlapping, once technical, but now informal vocabulary. Along the path of this almost three-thousand-year history the language that we now use, or find ourselves lacking, has been frozen into place at surprising moments. The word “pathology,” which would exactly suit the study of the passions (*páthema*, in Greek), serves instead, when we look in a medical dictionary, for the study of abnormality, the study of diseases: “anatomic and physiologic deviations from the normal in the tissues of animals and plants that are manifested as disease.”² In English the word “affection” means a mild, benign feeling of goodwill or liking, but the word is still linked to the philosophical term “affect,” which is used to translate *affectus* or *páthe* in philosophical works where rage or grief, shame or terror is more likely to be the state implied.

Our words often have behind them a single salient case that steers response from behind the curtains of time. When capitalized, ever since the Middle Ages, the word “Passion” is listed first in English dictionaries as denoting the sufferings of Jesus on the cross, or in

the period between the Last Supper and his death. With this overwhelming central instance in Christianity, passion in ordinary life is touched by suffering, and it is also passive, after the model of Jesus on the cross.

Our word “passionate” reaches us along a different route and holds on to a core meaning that we can trace back to Homer’s *Iliad*, where we might think first of someone easily roused to anger, someone in a state of vehemence. By extension, “passionate” refers to strong states of any emotion, but on the model of anger. To have a leading edge of anger as the path along which to understand any other highly aroused state, as the word “passionate” insists, would bind us back to Plato, Aristotle, and the Greek ethical and legal traditions. The word “passionate” understands anger as a positive state, the very essence of an aroused and dynamic spirit. Hector and Achilles sit in the shadow of this word, while Jesus on the cross stands offstage near the capitalized word “Passion.”

The Hellenistic philosophers of Greece and Rome, and above all the Stoics, endowed our civilization with a Latin vocabulary for the emotions and the inner life that seeped into every European philosophical tradition; Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Kant translated, modified, or reversed a standing list of Latin terms that reached back to the time of Cicero. But Stoicism was at war with the passions and viewed them as suffering rooted in false belief. The Stoics contrasted passions with actions, bending an earlier history back against itself.

In modern French or English the word “passion” in isolation would most often suggest sexual passion, while the plural “the passions” might sound archaic because most of the cargo associated with that term has now been transferred to “the emotions,” where a different organization and set of implied edges, meanings, and core instances design the topic in a new way. Once a new category, like the emotions, has taken over, our thinking and talk are liberated from the backstage presence of the Passion of Jesus, the anger of Achilles, but

they are liberated as well from the remarkable success of what we might call low-level, everyday Stoicism in all later European culture, and from the medical language of diseases that appeared, even to Cicero, to draw too strong an analogy between the diseases of the body and those states of the soul—grief, fear, anger, shame—that seemed to be diseases of the spirit or soul, needing treatment, therapy, and purgation.³

We can see in mid-eighteenth-century English philosophy and rhetoric the banishing of the term “passion” and its replacement by the new term “emotion.” At least on the surface this change of vocabulary seems to have rinsed out the deformations and preferences tacitly built into the earlier history of thought about the passions. What remained unchanged, when the passions came to be called the emotions, were the words for the specific passions or emotions. We still speak of the emotion of fear, or the emotion of anger, or of angry feelings and jealous feelings. If the full specificity of fear and anger and jealousy is preserved, what difference can it make to have gone from speaking of fear as a passion to regarding fear as an emotion or feeling? The answer lies, in part, in what would count as salient or typical examples of fear when one is speaking of a feeling of fear or an emotion of fear or of fear as a passion. A fear of mice or a phobia about sticky tactile surfaces (to use a Freudian example) might seem useful as instances of emotions. Such modern, quirky, therapeutic instances often govern twentieth-century discussions of inner states. But when describing the passions, Aristotle went at once to the single greatest, universal fear: the fear of imminent death, as a soldier might experience it on a battlefield, or as a trembling passenger might on a ship that seems about to sink. The inflection given to our tacit understanding of fear by what seem to be natural or colorless examples is often the most revealing snapshot of the shift from a vocabulary of passions to one of feelings, emotions, or moods.

What does it mean to speak, as we often do in the twentieth century, as though moods were our preferred version of inner states?

Passions, moods, emotions, and feelings are profoundly different configurations of the underlying notion of a temporary state of a person. Each term makes plausible a very distinct template. Boredom, depression, nostalgia, and anxiety might be natural first instances of what we mean by mood, but such states could never have been plausible examples of passions. Rage and wonder, central to any idea of what the passions are, seem out of place with the low-energy conditions generally meant by the term “mood.” Just as the English term “the passions” defines a different domain from the German *Leidenschaften*, which would be its translation, or from the French term *passions* or the Greek term *páthema*, so too within English itself we need to regard passions, emotions, feelings, moods as different languages with overlapping but also strongly differing accounts of what might count as a typical, a central, or an excluded inner state.

In spite of the limitations and confusions of language that I have hinted at, the stubborn, consecutive, rich thinking about the passions is one of the best arguments that we have for cultural memory, for a sustained core account of human nature in spite of the constructions of culture, power, and historical moment, and for the deep structural grasp on certain themes within the changing episodes and local design or redesign that can be traced in our three-thousand-year record.

What we know or how we think about the passions was, from the beginning, a complex product of overlapping and sometimes mutually encumbering work in philosophy, in literature—especially epic and tragedy—in medicine, in ethics, in rhetoric, in aesthetics, in legal and political thought. In our own time, new work in evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, and most recently in the neurobiology of the brain, along with work in game theory and economics, and, above all, in philosophy, continues the interwoven texture of shared, interdependent, sometimes interfering, even damaging, and sometimes enhancing collaborative thought. I will be speaking about some features of game theory and modern political philosophy when I speak of the new model of fear in chapter 6, and of legal philosophy and legal

procedures when I speak of anger and justice in chapters 8 and 9, but above all, throughout this book, I will be drawing on the intersection of philosophy, literature, and aesthetics.

Philosophical analysis of the passions in its crucial early phase was, in fact, the analysis of certain literary examples, both small-scale events within tragedies and the Homeric epics, and also profound accounts of those kinds of works of art, formally and as a whole. It is not because passions come up in literature at certain moments, felt by certain characters whose fate and motives concern us, but because, first of all, the nature of having an experience, *per se*, has close ties to what we mean by a passion, as the Greek word *pátbe* shows in meaning both passion and experience. A second, equally important reason lies in the fact that many of the larger, formal features of complete literary works, on a certain temporal scale, map temporal features of the passions.

In literature, the passions are not present merely as incidents; that is, as certain kinds of moments alongside other important moments like choosing, perceiving, remembering, talking, or acting. Key passions determine genres or literary kinds; large and ordered systems of aesthetic practices that generate the form of the whole. Elegy is a literary kind determined by mourning or grief. In its details the form known as elegy is generated by the details of mourning, including the way that mourning lasts, but then comes to an end, and including as well the larger darkening of the world in grief as though interest in life itself will never return. Above all, elegy makes clear the presence in any grief that we feel at the death of another person of an anticipation of our own death. A kind of grieving in advance for ourselves takes place in any grieving for another. Finally, in elegy, we commonly find near the end a resolve that seems for a while to increase the value of the time remaining in life, a resolve produced by this imaginative brush with our own death that has been occasioned by the death of another. The literary form that we call elegy, in its many features,

takes the shape that it does through an implicit anatomy of grief and mourning.

Tragedy, as Aristotle defined it, is both a certain kind of action and a work characterized by fear and pity, two passions intimately related to one another, as he showed. Fear, along with a set of forms generated by fear, reappeared once the novel became the central narrative practice in Europe. The gothic novel, which first appeared in the late eighteenth century, continues to be one of the most important popular genres, down to the novels of Stephen King and the terrifying movies of this year, last year, and every year. The gothic novel is in fact a form generated by the experience of fear. By describing fear, it induces fear in its reader or in an audience by means of step after step of graduated doses of fear. Edmund Burke listed many of the aesthetic features of any form based on fear: the representation of isolated persons, danger, night, and obscurity. Events in fear-centered stories have an abruptness and unexpectedness. Burke noted the part played by sounds, by animals, by confusion, and by the rapidity with which the action unfolds. In his book on our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful, Burke devotes distinct sections to darkness, vastness, difficulty, sound and loudness, blackness, intermittence, the cries of animals, stench, bitterness, and pain.⁴

Like elegy in its elaboration of the details of grief, the gothic or any other fear-based form uses most of the inner details of the fear experience, among them suddenness, surprise, dilated experiences of time, and nearly unbearable suspense in the moments of pause before the dreaded thing at last happens. The shape of time within fear-based forms is entirely different from the shape and pace of time within forms based on mourning or grief. That difference follows from the familiar arc and pace of time within the vehement states themselves. Wonder, anger, grief, and fear reveal different ways that time is rushed, dilated, ordered, and used up. Works of art modeled on those states follow distinct recipes for the use of time.

In aesthetic experience only certain forms create, as the gothic novel or the modern fright film does, the duplication in the reader of the aroused state of the central character. Pornography does this with sexual arousal. The reader of a pornographic novel is meant to experience sexual arousal and orgasm while reading about characters experiencing sexual arousal and orgasm. But when we see works depicting rage, the audience reacts, as Aristotle claimed was true for tragedy, with fear. Wrath is so unpredictable and so potentially violent a passion that when we see it begin, even in a work of art, we know that we are about to move into a wildly volatile and violent set of events. The spectator of rage feels fear when confronted with this prospect, not an anger that runs parallel to the central figure's rage. The counterpoint between the passions that are dramatized or read about and those quite different passions aroused in us when we witness those vehement states raises one of the most complex aesthetic questions about the passions. We are terrified or angry or sorry for Desdemona and disgusted with her husband while witnessing Othello's mistaken and, finally, murderous jealousy. What he feels and what we feel watching him in his impassioned state are interwoven, but distinct, adjacent states of arousal.

Of all the larger forms that translate the details of one passion, it is the working out of anger that has been most important. The epic as we know it through Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Melville's *Moby Dick* not only turns on the subject of anger but relies on the pitch, the process, and the speed of anger, along with its generation of consequential action such as killings, curses, and abrupt violence of word and deed.

To add one final, important modern instance, the novel in its many varieties captured the fanatic loyalty of readers by means of works that were state-based: fear in the case of the gothic novel of the late eighteenth century; pity and tears in the sentimental novel that has lasted at full strength from Richardson and Rousseau at the start

of the modern novel, to Dickens and Stowe, down to the films, novels, and television serials of the present.

From the side of literary culture, as these examples show, the passions are not important mainly as momentary situations within works. They are not only occasions where some character or another feels shame or anger, love or sorrow. Instead, wonder, pity, mourning, fear, anger, grief, and shame legislate what we mean by genre and by form in many of the most profound and culturally important works that we have.

Literature shares with the legal realm of cases, trials, rulings, and the formal codification of the law the highest importance because it is in these two domains that deeply thought out human experiences over dozens of centuries reveal the contours of the vehement passions. The aesthetic, legal, and scientific legitimacy of the workings of the strongest passions, along with the underlying features of felt mortality and spiritedness, unfold within our experience the fact that aroused or impassioned states create a third condition within everyday life, as far in one direction from our ordinary or settled state as the condition of sleep is in the other.