Introduction

This book takes as its starting point a divergence in views on what philosophers and linguists call 'effability' or 'expressibility': the extent to which it is possible, through the use of a public language, to make one's thoughts available to others. While many philosophers and linguists (Searle, Katz, Recanati, Bach) have defended stronger or weaker forms of effability, the 'struggle of the literary individual to defeat the ineffable' is a recurring motif in most twentieth-century critical thinking. In trying to explain this apparent divergence, I reconsider a wide range of interdisciplinary issues of particular interest to linguists, psychologists, literary theorists and philosophers of art; these include the move from World to Mind and from codes to pragmatic inference, the effects of semiotics, the emergence of so-called cognitivist, mind-internal or psychologistic approaches to communication, the limits of linguistic expression, the role of perceptual representations in our mental tapestry, the existence or otherwise of a property of literariness or essence of art, the possible distinctiveness of the poetic/artistic mind and the role of aesthetic experience in the production and interpretation of literary and artistic works. Pursuing these questions in adequately theoretical, empirically and cognitively aware terms casts the 'struggle of the literary mentality to defeat the ineffable' into an entirely different light.

An underlying theme throughout the discussion will be the relation between thinking in the humanities and empirical theorising of the type produced in the cognitive sciences, linguistics and philosophy of language. From the outset, I have consciously tried to develop this analysis within a broader – and, in a sense, political – framework involving not just the content and import of theorising in the humanities per se, but also its relationship to and possible interaction with theory articulated within the scientific world. In Chapters 1–6, I address this issue indirectly by showing how an empirically and cognitively aware approach casts new light on long-standing questions like the one on the limits of expression and the effability of human thought. Towards the end of this analysis (Chapter 7), I will confront this issue directly, suggesting that to attempt to articulate theory within literary and arts study in the modern day is in a sense to plead for interdisciplinarity, and arguing in favour of an up-to-date,

explanatorily adequate and also empirically and cognitively aware literary and art-theoretical discourse.

The belief that theorising in the humanities is intrinsically incapable of making *truth claims* – the only way in which it could articulate theory in any robust or adequate sense of the term – has become so deeply entrenched in the post-modern literary mentality that some literary scholars seem to have given up the ambition of actually forming or pursuing such claims. But nothing can be a theory of something unless it can make at least one truth claim about this something. The testability of the claim, or the way truth is pursued and arrived at, may vary, but the claim should nevertheless be capable of being both intended and recognised as a claim for truth, for it to be relevant to any adequate notion of theory. A convincing argument for this is the paradox arising in either of the two remaining alternatives. In the first alternative, I develop a theory (T) and I do not intend any of the claims I make in (T) to be true. This is paradoxical. In the second alternative, I develop a theory (T) and the claims I make in (T) are recognised as not having been intended as true. This is yet again paradoxical. Whether we realise it or not, theorising is bound to the pursuit of truth and this is very much so in the psychological and cognitive sciences as much as in the humanities.[1]

With these broader issues in mind, the question of effability may be seen as more an 'excuse' than a genuine question. Even so, this excuse was not chosen at random. The question of the effability of human thought itself, and the very different perspectives literary and philosophical approaches have adopted towards it, seem to offer an excellent vantage point for bringing to light a diverse range of inherited circularities that have characterised much of contemporary literary enquiry and sketching new directions for research in literary and art-theoretical study. So, how is this theoretical divergence to be explained? Are the different views put forward by literary authors and empirical theorists respectively arbitrary or empirically justified? Could the pessimistic perspectives on language and communication held in the literary world give ground for thinking that the literary mind is different from other minds, or that literature is a distinct kind of object from others?

The aim of this book is twofold: my goal is not just to investigate these questions anew, but also to pursue them in adequately theoretical, empirically and cognitively aware terms. In constant dialogue with a range of empirical and quasi-empirical disciplines, each chapter will lie on the borders of different interdisciplinary exchanges. Note also that my view of human communication and cognition will be in line with, and draw on the hypotheses of, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory framework (1995) and Wilson and Sperber (2012).

[1] I will return to this issue in greater detail in Chapter 2 in my discussion of postmodernism.

The book is organised as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the debate on effability of thought and the tensions between *linguistic optimism* and *linguistic pessimism* (i.e. between optimistic and pessimistic views about the extent to which it is possible, through the use of a public language system, to make one's thoughts available to others); these tensions are then used as a point of departure for reconsidering the nature of literature and art and bringing into focus the uniqueness of the mind that creates it. In Chapter 2, I focus on how major twentieth-century developments such as the move from World to Mind, the emergence of so-called cognitivist, mind-internal or psychologistic accounts and the subsequent move from codes to pragmatic inference may radically alter perspectives on human linguistic communication and consequently, on the issue of effability. Chapter 3 turns to the mind once again, this time to explore and account for possible justifications for linguistic pessimism: the fact that phenomenal – i.e. perceptual as opposed to conceptual – representations seem to be inexorably tied up with expressive difficulties forces us to accept the relative ineffability of at least some of the contents of the mind. Chapter 4 reassesses the theoretical implications of the collapse of structural essentialism in the theory of art and discusses whether it is still possible in the post-structural era to defend the idea that there is an essence of literature/art:[2] if literature/art had a distinct essence, this would, at least partly, explain the empirical observation that the limitations on verbally expressing the contents of the mind are felt with particular intensity in the literary domain. In Chapter 5, I argue against the binary oppositions of artefact-oriented and receiver-oriented approaches to literature and art and point in the direction of a new account that puts the artist or producer at the centre of attention. A producer-oriented approach to literature and art could shed new light on a diverse range of literary and art-theoretical issues including much of the literary individual's discontent with language: it reinstates the issue of linguistic pessimism as one that does not necessarily entail the inadequacy of human natural language as a communicative medium but raises questions about a possible distinctness of literature/art as an object or a distinctness of the literary mentality itself. Chapter 6 argues against what I will refer to as 'interpretationalism', i.e. the tendency to treat the experiential aspect of literature and art as subordinate to, and ultimately at the service of, the conceptual. An implicit theoretical assumption underlying this approach is that artworks and literary texts are objects ultimately designed to achieve effects at the conceptual level by

[2] I will refer to 'literature/art' and the 'literary/artistic' or 'literary/poetic' often, following the convention of separating them by a forward slash to indicate my conviction that a unified theory of literature and art is both entirely feasible and necessary. This is an issue I only mention in passing in the present book, but I discuss it extensively in my second book (currently in preparation), in which I propose and outline such a unified theory.

communicating such and such meanings, by being interpreted and understood. My discussion attempts to put back on the theoretical table a crucial component of the literary/art event that is widely neglected by contemporary literary study: aesthetic experience. With aesthetic experience back in the picture, the possibility that much of what a literary individual describes as the 'agony of expression' might amount to the agony for aesthetic achievement becomes more plausible: when a poet refers to the 'inadequacy of language' or speaks of their 'agony of expression', they are describing in impressionistic terms the 'symptoms' which they experience in engaging in the particular creative action of producing a poem. This impressionistic report, however, is very far removed from, and only minimally captures, the intricacy of the actual goings-on in the poet's/artist's mind. It is only by focusing on the latter that we might get an idea of the complex psychological and sensory states instigating linguistic pessimism. Finally, in Chapter 7, I lay out the rationale for and epistemological background to this analysis. After pinpointing what I describe as the four weaknesses of contemporary literary study – interpretationalism, applicationalism, historicism and unquestioning acceptance of intellectual authority – I argue for an up-to-date, explanatory, and empirically and cognitively aware form of literary and art theorising. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, genuine interdisciplinary interaction, particularly with empirical and cognitive domains, is a necessary prerequisite to articulating an adequate literary and art-theoretical discourse. My analysis looks at a range of theoretical, epistemic and methodological issues raised by such an interdisciplinary enterprise, such as the possibility of a methodological merger with the cognitive paradigm, the extent to which the scientific method is compatible with the nature of literature and art as an investigative object and the need for genuine, two-way interdisciplinary practice.

1 The Question of Expressibility or How Far It Is Possible to Speak Our Mind

> I haven't spoken to anyone for three days. In fact it seemed a good thing to keep silent. After all, words can't express all a person feels; words are inadequate.
>
> Andrei Tarkovsky, 'Mirror', 1974, A Mosfilm Unit 4 Production

> Dear Everyone,
>
> Words are inadequate, but I just wanted to thank you all for making my 'last' day both happy and memorable.
>
> From Neil Smith's email to the UCL students who organised his farewell party

> . . .it's ripped my heart apart. There are no words really to express it
>
> Sion Jenkins, describing what the experience of being in prison for six years has done to him

> I knew that I would write no books either in English or in Latin in the coming year, the years after that, or in all the years of this life of mine. There is only one reason for this, a strange and embarrassing one; I leave it to your infinite intellectual superiority to give it a place among what to your clear eyes is an orderly array of mental and physical phenomena. It is that the language in which I might have been granted the opportunity not only to write but also to think is not Latin or English, or Italian, or Spanish, but a language of which I know not one word, a language in which mute things speak to me and in which I will perhaps have something to say for myself someday when I am dead and standing before an unknown judge.
>
> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'The Lord Chandos Letter' (2007: 127)

The idea that language falls terribly short when it comes to articulating the rich and disparate contents of the human mental tapestry is not only intuitively appealing but also deeply entrenched in everyday folk thinking. At one time or other in our lives, we are bound to find ourselves facing up to mental goings-on that words cannot quite capture.

This introspectively well-evidenced fact seems to have been woven into the conventions of our daily verbal give and take. It is an accepted convention for a speaker to say something along the lines of 'You should have seen the look on his face', which implies that there was a noteworthy facial expression but does not go anywhere near to describing it; circumventions of this sort are

never perceived as preventing speakers from being communicatively relevant. It does indeed appear as if some things cannot be conveyed in words, and as if human public language systems have found and established ways of bypassing existing expressive limitations.

An interesting corollary of this question is, what sort of things are they that cannot be conveyed? Introspective evidence again suggests that some aspects of our private mental lives are more difficult to convey than others. In discussing the poets of the Great War, and especially Robert Graves, Cohen (1999 [online paper]) writes:

> The great limitations of language are never more fully realized than in the description of excruciating trauma. It is this sense which is most brutally exposed in the work of the poets of the Great War; their utter incapacity to comprehend the devastation, as well as their further inadequacy in passing on their experience through the simple and capacitating medium of language is the soul of much war poetry. Robert Graves gives voice to this frustration in his poem, 'Recalling War', in which he predicts indifference as a result of his generation's unavoidable inability to capture the absolute destruction of war through literature. 'Recalling War' itself is a testament to the fact that prose and imagery, however inspired, are simply incapable of expressing what is essentially expressionless.

The hopelessness of language in expressing what is essentially inexpressible is a central concern that underlies the entire poetic milieu of two major twentieth-century Holocaust poets, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, whose poetry can be read as a relentless and agonising battle against the ineffable; using different means to the same end, Celan and Jabès' work is a testament to the great limitations of language, as much as a continuous struggle to overcome these limitations by stretching language to the limit or even undermining language. Celan, a German-speaking Romanian Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, split between German as his mother-tongue and German as the language of his parents' murderers, progressively sinks into a feeling of estrangement from language as a medium that completely fails to capture and articulate the devastation and absolute incomprehensibility of the Shoah; Celan ultimately turns against language by creating a language of his own through a dismantling of language. The way his multilingualism is employed in his work – his poetry draws on a striking span of references, to German, of course, but also Romanian, French, Hebrew, Italian, Latin and Ancient Greek – is telling of a mentality that, suffocating within the expressive limitations of language, resorts to the apparatus of all languages known to him in a desperate attempt to articulate that which cannot be articulated. In a similar way, Jabès – an Egypt-born Jew, who in 1956 was forced to flee Egypt because of his Jewish descent – develops a poetic language which amalgamates a striking diversity of genres from aphorism through to prose, essay, commentary, lyrical song and theatrical play, in search of an expressive form that could grapple with

language's utter incapacity to speak of the excruciating trauma of war and dislocation (Giannisi 2016).

It is not random that in twentieth-century literature the most telling cases of a sense of entrapment in the expressive limitations of language seem to be associated with excruciating trauma. It is often relatively easy to put into words a thought that crosses our mind, provided that the thought is clearly conceived, but so hard to convey the feeling a certain thought may elicit, quite independently of how 'clearly' this feeling is perceived.[1] The reason for saying 'quite independently' rather than just 'independently' is the intuitive fact that feelings too can be experienced with greater or lesser clarity. Just as intensely reflecting on a thought allows the thought to become progressively more refined and graspable, so intensely experiencing a feeling allows this feeling to gain greater and greater luminosity. It may be that clarity for thought systems and clarity for perception and sensation systems are rather different things, but the rule seems to apply equally to both: varying degrees of clarity in the way an object is thought about or perceived go hand in hand with varying degrees of expressibility and clarity of expressibility.[2] Sensation systems, and emotion systems, for that matter, appear to evade the resources and expressive repertoire of public human languages in a way not fully applicable to thought systems.

In the twentieth century, folk reservations about the expressive capacities of public human languages were brought to the foreground of literary-theoretical discussion, and were fundamental in the deconstructive turn 'against language' on the part of avant-garde artists, theorists and movements. 'The struggle of the literary mentality to defeat the ineffable' gained unprecedented urgency, and established itself as a telling motif of most twentieth-century critical thinking. This is by no means a contingent fact. The intensity with which the folk discontent with language came to the fore in the early twentieth century must certainly be linked to the profound effect that emerging psychoanalytic doctrines had on the art world, taking the inward turn towards the artist's and literary individual's private mental life[3] to an entirely new level. Movements

[1] To clarify, let us say that by 'thought' I refer to a conceptual representation – as I will show later, however, conceptual representations should be regarded as standardly eliciting phenomenal and privative material as well; by 'feeling', I pre-theoretically refer here to both the emotional reactions and bodily sensations or physiological responses that can potentially be elicited by thoughts.

[2] This is something I very often encounter in my own poetic endeavours: concentrating mentally on a feeling helps me experience it with clarity, which, in turn, is somehow reflected in the way this feeling or sensation is conveyed through words.

[3] It can be claimed that this inward turn towards one's own mental life had already begun with the practices of the Romantics in the previous century, although it had occurred for the first time in the sixth century BC, in ancient Greek lyric poetry.

such as Surrealism or Vorticism aimed to capture the mechanics of the subconscious, the workings of instantaneous perceptual impression and the elusiveness of dreams. This shift from the facts of an outside world to the way this outside world is perceived and responded to by the individual consciousness somehow propelled the avant-garde literary individual's growing discontent with the expressive powers of language. Language is 'attacked', deconstructed and distorted at all levels – syntagmatic, paradigmatic and phonological; its expressive repertoire stretched to breaking point with an ambiguous 'gesture' that appears to be both a retribution for the limitations it imposes on the limitless conceptions and perceptions of the mind, and, at the same time, a plea for entirely novel possibilities of expression. The voices that drew attention to our imprisonment in language were particularly intense and abundant in the twentieth century, but had not been lacking in the previous century either. In the mid-1800s, the impotence of language was central to the work of Gustavo Bécquer: pondering the 'irrationality of inspiration', Bécquer sees the actualised poem as a pale reflection of what the poet would have wanted to express. Shelley takes a similar line, insisting that 'the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet', while in a sonnet by Mallarmé, a swan, in the face of which the poet is symbolized, is trapped in a freezing lake. The water is the swan's element but at the same time, it is this element itself that traps him and pins him down (see Peter Lamarque 1999 (online paper)). Along the same lines, in his paper 'Mary Shelley on the therapeutic value of language' Brewer (1994: 1 [online paper]) sees the inadequacy thesis as an intellectual meeting point between Mary and Percy Shelley. Brewer assumes that many of the pronouncements in Mary Shelley's fiction regarding the effectiveness of language – her concern, for example, with the failure of words to improve the human condition in her historical novel *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* – are directly influenced by Percy's similar declarations:

> Mary Shelley's somewhat skeptical attitude toward the power of words was probably influenced by Percy Shelley's views on language. In 'On Life', Percy writes: 'How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being' (475); he goes on to argue that 'the misuse of words and signs' prevents 'the mind' from acting freely (477). His frustration with the inadequacy of language is forcibly expressed in his note to 'On Love': 'These words are inefficient and metaphorical—Most words so—No help—' (474). Moreover, in 'A Defense of Poetry', Percy Shelley asserts that over time words decline into 'signs for portions or classes of thought [i.e. abstract ideas] instead of pictures of integral thoughts '—if poets do not intervene to revitalize them, the language becomes dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse' (482). Percy's concern about the inadequacy and abstraction of language is also expressed in his poetry. In 'Prometheus Unbound' Prometheus repudiates his curse on Jupiter, declaring that 'words are quick and vain' (IV.i.303), a sentiment echoed by the Maniac in 'Julian and Maddalo', who exclaims 'How vain / Are words!'. (472–473)

However, more interesting than any explicit complaint against language, I think, is the implicit sense of hopelessness in relation to the expressive capacities of language that underpins much twentieth-century poetry and prose:

'April and Silence'
Spring lies forsaken.
The velvet-dark ditch
crawls by my side
without reflections.

The only thing that shines
are yellow flowers.

I am cradled in my shadow
like a violin
in its black case.

The only thing I want to say
glimmers out of reach
like the silver
at the pawnbroker's.

(Tranströmer 2011)

The multitude of implicit accusations, the range of major literary works that criticism has identified as 'self-referential' allegories of the limitations and inadequacy of public language, is truly striking. Kafka's *The Trial* could potentially be read as a self-referential allegory of the deceptive and inadequate nature of language. In *The Trial*, the emphasis is on the language's inability to communicate sense and, to some extent, on its occasional pointlessness and meaninglessness. In *L'Innommable,* Beckett undermines grammatical form to produce an allegory of the speaker's sense of imprisonment within an alien and alienating language (Taylor-Batty 2007: 163), while in *Stories and Texts for Nothing* a constant underlying theme is bitterness towards language and the failure to find consolation in it. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and its protagonists' failure to communicate, explores the idea that words fail to capture even a small part of the depth of human life. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* may be perceived as questioning the validity of language as a means of reporting and its potency as a means of expressing, while *Orlando* has been acclaimed by critics as 'Woolf's own story of the inadequacy of language to name the *thing itself* ' (Smith 2006: 57).

Quite obviously, developments which are for the most part internal to the literary and art world are responsible for the thesis of the 'inadequacy' of language – or *linguistic pessimism*, as I would like to call it – becoming so

prominent within the past couple of centuries. But can these developments be held responsible for the apparent pervasiveness in everyday thinking of the belief that language is inadequate? This belief seems so strongly evidenced by universal human intuitions that linguistic pessimism could, perhaps, claim for itself a certain level of justification. I'll come back to this shortly.

Here, the stronger or weaker forms of linguistic optimism advocated by many pragmatic theorists and philosophers of language in the last three decades provide a notable contrast. When the literary thinker defends the 'ineffable' as an empirically uncontroversial fact, the pragmatic theorist's and philosopher's faith in the expressive adequacy of language can only be received with a certain degree of surprise. To summarise what I will call the *thesis of linguistic optimism,* let us turn for a moment to Carston's illuminating discussion of the notion of *effability* (the term refers to the extent to which it is possible, through the use of a public language system, to make one's thoughts available to others; for relevant discussion, see Carston 2002: 32–37, 79–80):

> The most general formulation of a principle of effability is along the following lines: 'each proposition or thought can be expressed by some sentence in any natural language'. Much hangs on what is meant by 'expressed' here. In the previous sections, when I have talked of a proposition or thought expressed, I have not assumed this meant that it was 'encoded', or fully formulated, by a linguistic expression, quite the contrary in fact. But, as used by Katz (1978, 1981), 'can be expressed by some sentence' could seem to mean 'can be encoded by some sentence'. So there are at least the following two, very different, possible principles to be considered:
>
> **First Principle of Effability**: 'Each proposition or thought can be expressed (= conveyed) by some utterance of some sentence in any natural language'.
>
> **Second Principle of Effability**: 'Each proposition or thought can be expressed (= encoded) by some sentence in any natural language'. Carston (2002: 33)

The first of the two principles is relatively weak and does not seem to raise too many objections. This is not to say, of course, that any individual speaker should always be able to express verbally any particular thought she has; the claim is more along the lines of any thought being in principle expressible – say, by a more able speaker – in some context. With no given limits on either the richness of available contexts, or the ways in which contextual material could be used to enrich encoded material, the first effability principle seems largely uncontroversial. The second principle, on the other hand, is relatively stronger and can be said to give rise at least to the following objection: it is plausible that in our internal language we often fix time and space references in terms of a private logbook and an ego-centred map rather than in terms of some kind of universally shared spatio-temporal coordinates (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 192). Most references to individuals, places or events appear