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.
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> <div align="right">Andrei Tarkovsky, 'Mirror', 1974, A Mosfilm Unit 4 Production</div>

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

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

> 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.
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> <div align="right">Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'The Lord Chandos Letter' (2007: 127)</div>

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

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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

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[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 grow-
ing 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.

<div align="right">(Tranströmer 2011)</div>

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

to be fixed on the basis of such private time and space coordinates, making it impossible to fully encode the thoughts that contain them in a public language such as English. Again a few words from Carston (2002: 33):

The force of this point is perhaps most vividly felt by considering thoughts one has about oneself; how I represent myself to myself must inevitably be quite different from the way you or anyone represents me, and so it must be for all of us. The same holds for the way I mentally represent my spatial and temporal location at any given instant, that which I might express by the words 'here' and 'now'; ... This is a function of the 'ego-centred map' referred to in the quote and it extends far beyond these self-references. My mental representation of the woman who is my mother is doubtless a private one, probably not even shared with my siblings. ...These sorts of differences in representations of an object are not, and cannot be, encoded in natural-language sentences.[4]

It follows from this brief discussion that the debate on the effability of human thought is somehow inextricably tied up with another debate, on what is technically known as the *linguistic underdeterminacy thesis*: the thesis that sentence meaning typically underdetermines speaker meaning, or to put it in pre-theoretical terms, the thesis that speakers typically use sentences to communicate a lot more than the sentences themselves mean in their own right.[5] And, although a distinction between what words mean and what speakers mean in using these words – the different perspectives can be described as code-based or semiotic, on the one hand, and pragmatic, on the other – is explicit in the distinction between an 'encodability' version and a 'conveyability' version of the principle of effability, the fact remains that in the eyes of a poet, even the weaker of the two principles seems counterintuitively strong.

Did the literary individuals get it wrong? Or is it that pragmatic theorists and philosophers are missing the point? If it is true that each proposition or thought can be conveyed by an utterance of some sentence in any natural language, does this mean that linguistic pessimism is an illusion, a figment of the mind, an epiphenomenon? If so, how is the pervasiveness of this illusion in folk intuitions to be explained? And furthermore, how are we to account for the palpable difference in the intensity with which linguistic pessimism is experienced by a non-literary and a literary mind?

[4] Carston goes on to discuss a third effability principle – 'For every statement that can be made using a context-sensitive sentence in a given context, there is an eternal sentence that can be used to make the same statement in any context' (2002: 34) – which is not strictly speaking relevant to our discussion. My aim in this thesis is not so much to assess the debate on effability per se, as to use the divergence in views about effability between literary and philosophical camps as a starting point for reconsidering pertinent literary-theoretic and art-philosophical questions.

[5] In Chapter 2, I will explore in some detail how semiotic and pragmatic models of communication offer different perspectives on linguistic optimism and pessimism.

Research in the last thirty years has provided strong evidence that both ordinary and literary language exploit the same pragmatic mechanisms (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 2008; Wilson and Sperber 2012), depend on the same innately determined and universal human capacity (the language capacity, Chomsky 1976) and draw on the same mental system of conceptual representations (the language of thought or mentalese, Fodor 1983). Given, then, that the formal medium in which literary individuals and ordinary speakers express themselves is the same, one is almost compelled to ask: could there be a non-trivial explanation for why the alleged inadequacy of language is so much more intensely experienced in the literary mind?

It is not only literary individuals who grapple with language all the time. Philosophers and scientists also grapple with language. If language is after all in some sense and to some extent inadequate, scientists and philosophers should be no less disappointed by the expressive limitations of language given their equal involvement in the act of spelling out the contents of the mind. A plausible line of explanation, then, may concern the nature of what the literary individual is trying to convey and the ways in which this is significantly different from what the philosopher and scientist are trying to convey. Other lines of investigation are also worth pursuing, each highlighting distinct sets of issues for a philosophy of literature and art. It may be, for instance, that much of the literary individual's discontent with language is entirely independent of the mechanics of expression, and results to some extent from the retroactive effects of critical thinking on the way literary individuals and practising artists assess and evaluate introspective evidence. It is not implausible, for instance, that the emergence and commercial success of semiotics in the twentieth century has led to an overinflation of linguistic pessimism. Alternatively, the literary individual's discontent with language may be independent of the mechanics of expression precisely because expression is not the issue after all. In later chapters, I will offer preliminary arguments against an approach I call *interpretationalism* and argue that neither expression, nor interpretation is as central to the nature of art as has been previously assumed.[6] Finally, I would like to suggest that, if there is a genuinely significant reason why language seems so inadequate to the literary mind, it may relate more to particularities of the literary mind itself, and the specific kind of use to which literary individuals put language: the specific kind of use we refer to as literature or art.

From this perspective, the divergence in views between literary and philosophical approaches on how much of the mind we can actually express

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[6] In a way, expression and interpretation go hand in hand, involving equivalent processes at the production and reception end. However, I will argue later that neither of them should be seen as the focal element in an analysis of the nature of art.

verbally relates not so much to language as to the mind itself. A mind that responds to the world through its senses, that appreciates the world, or at least some objects in the world, in an aesthetic way, that pulsates with the intensity and richness of its perceptual representations. A mind capable of special forms of creativity. A mind capable of art.

The debate on effability is an excellent starting point for reconsidering and finding a way out of a range of circularities and confusions that have plagued literary study for nearly a century. This should in turn enable us to explore new directions for literary theoretic research and consider how they could be pursued in constructive dialogue with a range of empirical or quasi-empirical disciplines. I am convinced that this reconsideration will help to show how the apparently contradictory views of thinkers in the humanities and the cognitive sciences may nevertheless not be mutually exclusive,[7] and may enable us get closer to understanding the special nature of literature/art and the uniqueness of the mind that creates it.

In the next chapter, I will consider how a major twentieth-century development, which the literary and art-philosophical worlds are only just beginning to discover, may radically alter perspectives on what humans can and cannot communicate. More specifically, we will look at the move from World to Mind – i.e. the emergence of so-called cognitivist, mind-internal or psychologistic accounts of communication – and the subsequent move from codes to pragmatic inferences.

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[7] Hopefully, by the end of this analysis you will have seen that this is not an oxymoron.