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Emotions and Words

Representing Emotions in Narrative

The classic view of the relation of words to emotion holds that emotions are preverbal, while the contemporary "psychological constructionist" view argues that labels create emotions out of inchoate affect. Literature reflects the classic view, yet the pervasive use of labels in narrative underscores the power of naming the "psychological constructionist" view implies. But literature aims to be vivid, and mere naming can seem dull or trite. A spectrum of techniques has arisen that allow writers to represent emotions without naming them. Emotions for which no names exist, however, present a challenge to representation. T.S. Eliot proposed the "objective correlative," but found that not even an objective correlative is able to capture some emotions. This essay summarizes recent theories of emotion in neuroscience and psychology; it considers how this debate is applicable to an understanding of the representation of emotion in narrative; and it gives an overview of various ways in which emotion has been represented in narrative fiction. Finally, the article looks at some examples of autobiographers' more or less successful efforts to represent unnamable emotions. Their efforts reveal a pressure to fall back on naming for the sake of communication and control. Moreover, the conciseness of naming is consistent with narrative telling.

1. Competing Theories of Emotions and Words in Psychology and Neuroscience

The relation between emotions and words has become an object of contention in neuroscience and psychology. The issue is which comes first.

The classic idea, traceable to William James and adopted by many neuroscientists, is that emotions are primary and preverbal. It has been called the "embodied" account of feeling (Hogan 2017, 46). An "emotion" is a bodily response that is triggered by something. For example, fear is triggered by the appearance of a predator. Fear expresses itself initially as a bodily response, such as freezing, and only becomes conscious half a second later. When we become conscious of our body's automatic response, we experience it as "feeling" – our brain's image of what our body is doing.

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio can serve as a contemporary representative of the classic idea. Damasio is emphatic: Emotions, meaning bodily responses, come first. With a delay of less than a second, we sense them as "feelings," in the form of mental images. Damasio writes:

> The world of emotions is largely one of actions carried out in our bodies, from facial expressions and postures to changes in viscera and internal milieu. Feelings of emotion, on the other hand, are composite *perceptions* of what happens in our body and mind when we are emoting. As far as the body is concerned, feelings

> are images of actions rather than actions themselves; the world of feelings is one
> of perceptions executed in brain maps. (2010, 109–110)

In his book *Self Comes to Mind* (2010), Damasio presents the relationship of language to feelings in evolutionary terms. Evolutionarily, according to Damasio, feelings of emotion surely existed long before human beings had language. He proposes that evolution produced three increasingly complex types of "selves": the protoself, which is not yet conscious but experiences "primordial feelings" (2010, 180); the core self, which is conscious of the interaction of the body with the outside world and processes these interactions in "wordless" images; and the autobiographical self (the self such as we know it), which possesses memory and language, in addition to consciousness.[1]

The hypothetical proto-self experiences mental images. Consciousness, by which Damasio means consciousness of self in the sense that one is aware that one's feelings relate to oneself, sets in at the level of the "core self." Language is an even later development. He states: "Core consciousness does not require language and must have preceded language" (2010, 172). Damasio believes that not just humans but also higher mammals have core consciousness. Additionally, humans have autobiographical selves, and Damasio conjectures that certain mammals – "wolves, our ape cousins, marine mammals and elephants, cats, and, of course, that off-the-scale species called the domestic dog" (2010, 26) – do as well.

In his latest book *The Strange Order of Things* (2018), Damasio supplements his account by going into more detail about what role language plays in a mental theater full of images. He proposes that in humans, a verbal translation *accompanies* all perceptions and ideas: "Our perceptions and the ideas they evoke continuously generate a parallel description in terms of language" (2018, 89). This verbal translation, however, is definitely a secondary affair:

> The incessant language translation of any image that cruises in our minds is possibly the most spectacular mode of enrichment. Technically, the images that serve as vehicles for the language tracks travel in parallel to the original images being translated. They are added images, of course, translated derivations of *the originals*. (2018, 92–93; emphasis added)

The neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, in his pathbreaking first book *The Emotional Brain* (1996), adopted a definition of emotion that was very similar to Damasio's. But in his more recent book *Anxious* (2015), he changes his mind. He rocks the neuroscientific boat by accusing his fellow neuroscientists of defining emotions in nonconscious terms in order to make them more tractable as a research topic (LeDoux 2015, 234). What he means is that scientists have artificially redefined emotion as a corporeal response to a stimulus because that is something they can observe and study. He pleads for reverting to normal everyday usage: the word "emotion" should not designate the automatic corporeal response but, rather, the conscious feeling. LeDoux wants to reserve the term "emotion" for a feeling that is conscious to the point that one knows cognitively that one is having it. According to him, the only reliable test of emotion, thus defined, is self-report: the ability to talk about it (2015, 149–150). Consequently, we cannot

possibly attribute emotions to animals, because they do not speak; we just don't know if they have emotions or not. In this account, an "emotion" is no longer a bodily response or even a wordless "feeling," but a conscious and hence verbalizable mental event.

The psychologist and neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett, finally, argues for the primacy of language in emotion. "Emotion," for her, as for LeDoux, means a conscious feeling. In her 2017 book *How Emotions Are Made*, Barrett insists that concepts, for which words function as representatives, channel and determine our emotions right from the start. How does this work?

Barrett believes that the human brain has a predictive mechanism that interprets a given situation and tells the body what to do. The result is affect. Affect is an unspecific positive or negative state combined with a degree of arousal. A given situation does not trigger a specific bodily response – "variation is the norm," she writes (2015); nor can a given bodily response be unambiguously traced to a specific cause (thus, a feeling of malaise might mean falling in love, but it might also be the flu). The brain then interprets our physiological response along with the triggering situation and tells us what emotion we are feeling. Thus for Barrett, an emotion is a cognitive event. An emotion is "your brain's *creation* of what your bodily sensations mean, in relation to what is going on around you in the world" (2017, 30)[2] – a creation that relies heavily on preexisting, culturally transmitted "emotion concepts." Words, as a convenient shorthand for these concepts, are all-important. If we think we are experiencing distinct, discrete emotions, it is only because language tells us we are. She draws the analogy to a rainbow. Because we have concepts (and words) for colors, we see discrete stripes of color, although there are none in nature. Barrett disputes the classic idea that each emotion has a distinct essence and involves a unique physical reaction and / or facial expression – the foundation of the "basic emotion method" (2017, 7, 40–55, 157–171).[3] According to her, we know that we feel good or bad, but beyond that, "emotion words" have taught us to name our emotions and to believe that we have distinctly different ones. Thus for Barrett, language plays a crucial role in the very genesis of emotions: words make emotions.[4] This theory is known as the psychological constructionist view. A 2016 article on "Language and Emotion" cites many studies that support it (Lindquist 2016, 580–584).[5]

Finally, some theoreticians of emotion maintain that emotion words can mislead us. Thus the psychologist Graham Richards argues that language both actively constitutes our feelings and is inadequate to the task:

> The meanings and even the identities of our emotions are not self-evident givens but are actively constituted by the language we have available for discoursing about them. [...] This language nevertheless remains less than fully adequate to the task, and [...] phenomenologically, there is a vast hinterland of confusion and feelings about which we can say nothing coherent. (Richards 2005, 62)

In short, the "label" we decide to apply to the way we are feeling may be off base (Hogan 2017, 43).

The disjunction between words and feeling is certainly something many literary writers have felt. This sense of disjunction must be considered in any investigation of how writers express emotions in narrative, and I shall return to it below. The more fundamental neuroscientific dispute over when emotion labels kick in – whether they obediently translate preexisting emotions (Damasio), or whether they actively impose a concept on an inchoate affect (Barrett) and thus create the emotion – is of less central relevance to the representation of emotions in narrative, because historically people have believed that we have different distinct emotions that can be named, and most still do. Therefore, writers have very often aimed to represent specific emotions like fear, disgust, rage, etc. But the considerations at play in the scientific dispute – the question of whether language steps onto the scene late and secondarily or is a, if not *the* principal actor in the show – is directly relevant to the representation of emotions in narrative, because it sheds light on how writers of narrative go about representing emotion. Literature makes us believe that emotions precede descriptions of emotion. Yet the way writers represent emotions lends credence to Barrett's insistence on the power of emotion words.

In what follows, I consider how this neuroscientific debate has been received in literary emotion studies (section 2). I then give an overview of various ways in which emotion has been represented in narrative fiction (sections 3–5). Finally, I look closely at three particularly interesting cases of the representation of emotion in twentieth-century autobiographical narrative and draw some conclusions (sections 6–7).

2. A Reflection on the Reception of Neuroscience in Literary Emotion Studies

Since the mid-1990s, literary and cultural scholars have engaged with scientific – psychological, cognitive scientific and, increasingly, neuroscientific – findings and methods primarily for the sake of the promise they hold for an understanding of audience response. Given the sciences' robust methods and technologies for testing human responses, it is not surprising that literary and cultural scholars have looked to these disciplines above all in order to gain insight into this aspect of their fields. Important interdisciplinary work between literature and neuroscience specifically emerged in the last decade. For example, literary scholar Natalie M. Phillips (2015) worked with a cross-disciplinary team to perform an fMRI study on thirty Ph.D. candidates in literature reading *Mansfield Park* that showed strong differences in brain activity between close reading and pleasure reading. Neuroscientific evidence provoked literary scholar Laura Otis (2015) to reexamine the question of whether and, if so, to what degree readers visualize while reading.[6]

In literary emotion studies, researchers have also focused on response. A central question has been: how is it that we are moved by fictions, given that we

know the people, places, and events in fiction do not exist? Literary scholar and theoretician of emotion Patrick Colm Hogan has long argued that readers' undeniable emotional response to fiction is a function of simulation, a concept he adapted from philosophy and cognitive science (2011a, 55). More recently Hogan, referring to such neuroscientists as LeDoux and Panksepp, has argued that simulation is evolutionarily adaptive (2022a, 136). Literary critics also embraced the discovery of mirror neurons. Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007, viii) alludes to mirror neurons as the neural basis for empathy. In a 2011 article, neuroscientist Gallese and literary scholar Wojciehowski proposed a theory of "liberated embodied simulation" to explain both the reception and the production of narrative based on recent discoveries in neuroscience, in particular mirror neurons, which constitute a sub-personal basis for intersubjectivity, hence for "embodied simulation." "Liberated" refers to the liberating effect of fiction. Fiction and imaginary events, the authors contend, can provoke the mirroring mechanisms just as readily as real events. Wojciehowski and Gallese (2022) cite further evidence that explains, on a sub-personal level, why readers readily identify with and become attached to fictional characters, namely an fMRI study showing that the same brain regions are activated by subjects' trait evaluations of real people and of fictional characters (66–67). Some literary scholars, such as literary and film scholar Alexa Weik von Mossner (2022), have worked with this concept of liberated embodied simulation. But noncognitive, 'embodied' approaches to emotion in literature as well as simulation theory itself have also been contested (Matravers 2022).

While inquiries into response have dominated the reception of neuroscience in literary studies of emotion, certain literary scholars have also turned to neuroscience in order to investigate the literary representation of emotion. Literary scholar Joseph Carroll observes that

> two main schools now contend for primacy in emotion research: the evolutionary school that leads from Darwin through Ekman, Izard, and Panksepp to Keltner and his associates, and the constructivist school most prominently identified with the work of Lisa Feldman Barrett. (2022, 88)

Carroll asserts, similarly to Hogan and Irish in their Introduction to the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Emotion* (2022), that "since the post-structuralist revolution of the 1970s and 80s, most humanists have aligned themselves with constructivist views of human nature" (2022, 88).

This notwithstanding, precisely the evolutionary school has proved fruitful for discussions of the literary representation of emotion. Darwin wrote *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), and his followers such as Paul Ekman have likewise studied emotional expression. Scientific studies of the *expression* of emotion offer an obvious point of convergence between neuroscientific theories of embodied emotion and the literary *representation* of emotion. In her article "Affective Neuroscience" (2022) Laura Otis investigates this overlap. She gives a comprehensive overview of modern scientific theories of embodied emotion[7] and demonstrates that "scientific models that ground emotion in human bodies coincide with fiction writers' advice on how to craft moving scenes,"

namely by using sensory imagery (15). Patrick Colm Hogan, who has followed developments in psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience since his book *The Mind and Its Stories* (2003), and who subscribes to the evolutionary school's belief that there are "emotion systems" (for fear, disgust, anger, etc.) (Hogan 2017, 48–54),[8] also applies neuroscience to the representation of emotion. For example, he integrates neuroscientific findings on attachment and its expression into his discussion of the romantic love plot in *Romeo and Juliet* (Hogan 2011b, 82–85, 89–97).

Hogan's and Otis's positions on the relevance of neuroscience for the literary study of emotion are compelling. As Hogan asserts, the study of emotion should be interdisciplinary (2011b, 1). Both Hogan and Otis argue that literary scholars should pay attention to what neuroscientists are finding. Both of them also argue that literature has much to offer neuroscience. As Hogan writes, storytelling presents us with "the largest body of works that systematically depict and provoke emotion" (2011b, 1). Otis observes that "writers' insights may suggest new hypotheses to test" (2022, 16).

Yet Hogan's cautionary note in the Afterword of *Literature and Emotion* is important:

> Everyone working in the field acknowledges that all interpretations of experimental data need to be approached critically. [...] Few people seem to recognize the degree to which apparently objective tests can be recruited for doubtful or even blatantly false conclusions. (2017, 174)

Beyond this, as it may seem unnecessary to state, neuroscience is a rapidly developing field, not a stable, unchanging foundation on which literary scholars can build. In the neuroscientific study of emotion there are, as we have seen, fundamental disagreements, including a basic disagreement about what should be called an *emotion*. Like theoreticians in any field, neuroscientists connect the dots of empirical findings into bigger theoretical pictures and in so doing introduce a considerable degree of speculation. Their theories about emotions and words are a case in point. Their conflicting views will remind literary scholars of the veteran debate in linguistics about the degree to which language patterns control thought ('Whorfianism') – a debate that was never resolved. Neuroscience currently resurrects this debate apropos of emotion, asking whether concepts describe or actively shape emotion. And neuroscience too leaves us with an open question.

The neuroscientific debate raises questions that are pertinent to the representation of emotion in narrative, but, to return to the point that literature is relevant for neuroscience, it should be clear that expressions of emotion and representations of emotions including verbal representations do not just have the status of outputs, but are inputs too: they do not just express and represent, but can arouse emotion (as in emotional contagion and readers' responses to fiction). If affects are susceptible to being shaped by concepts, as Barrett asserts, then they and the concepts themselves are also susceptible to shaping by other types of representations of emotion. For example, a story like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Speckled Band" (1892) can (to speak from personal experience) teach a

child fear. The idea that a venomous snake can slither down a phony bell cord and into one's bed while one is asleep is capable of provoking fear, even in places where there are no such snakes and rooms are not equipped with bell cords. This idea gives contour to a child's concept of fear even if that concept was formerly empty. The influence from the fictional or mediated world on emotion is something neuroscientists should investigate as they venture into the foggy terrain between emotions and words in the hope of sorting out the relationship between them. Literature is an obvious place for them to look, because in literature, writers have worked hard to create something out of words in order to suggest and provoke feeling.

3. Emotions in Literature: Naming

As is apparent from LeDoux's recent change of heart, the very word *emotion* means different things to different people. Patrick Colm Hogan and Bradley J. Irish, in their Introduction to the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Emotion* (2022, 2–3), discuss the issues involved in defining *emotion* and cite Nico H. Frijda and Klaus R. Scherer's view that emotion is "one of the fuzziest concepts in all the sciences" (2009, 142). In what follows, I use the word *emotion* according to what Hogan and Irish call the "folk concept" (2). The "folk concept" is identical to the everyday sense that LeDoux pleads for in *Anxious:* an emotion is a conscious feeling.

With this definition of emotion in mind, let us now turn to the relation of emotions and words in literature. How do literary writers represent their characters' emotions? Up to a point, this question is easily answered: from antiquity until the present day, writers have above all relied on emotion words – words like fear, anger, joy, disgust, or shame. They name their characters' emotions. Why? It's easy. To pick a glaring example from the myriad instances of the reliance on naming in literature, Stefan Zweig in *Angst* (1925) relies on the word *Angst* – indeed, pounds on it – to convey the heroine's fear to the reader. In contrast, it takes a master to invent scenarios that make the reader understand what the character is feeling without naming the emotion. Graham Richards and Paul Stenner justifiably call attention to the efforts of "poets, novelists, biographers and dramatists" to do better in describing emotions than employ "single words, such as *fear, anger, joy* and *sad*" (2023, 137), but the fact remains that if an emotion label exists, writers use it, just as they would use any other word in the dictionary.

Today, as Laura Otis has shown, creative writing teachers encourage the sensuous depiction of emotions in lieu of merely naming them, on grounds that such sensuous depictions are more gripping (2022, 20). Otis quotes the novelist Jim Grimsley, who instructs his students to *show* anger, for instance by writing that a character slammed his hand on the table, rather than write "he was angry" (Otis 2022, 15). Slamming a hand on a table is, of course, a legible, conventional

sign of anger. Do writers have options beyond such legible, conventional signs? I will argue that they do, and in fact that they have a spectrum of options, but that the temptation to use emotion words nevertheless remains very great. Descriptions of emotions that proceed without the use of emotion words can leave the reader baffled. So, even if authors try to find other ways to express a character's emotion, they often take the precaution of identifying the emotion by naming it. Barrett is absolutely right in stressing the power of emotion words. These words delimit a ballpark. To use Doležel's terminology for theorizing how words on the page become images in the reader's head, emotion words, as the "intension," create quite an "extension," or mental imagining (Doležel 1998, 135–39). Everyone has associations with words like *fear* and *anger*.

4. Techniques for Representing Emotions in Literature besides Naming

Grimsley's example of a hand slamming on a table to express anger exemplifies a prevalent technique that has been employed since antiquity, one that supports the emotion theories of Damasio and the earlier LeDoux, namely to mention the outward manifestations of the character's emotion – the physical response. It makes for more vivid writing to speak of a thumping heart or of eyes lighting up than to say "fear" or "joy." However, although these metonymies may well have originated descriptively, in the course of time they became codified. If you say your hero's "hair stood on end," that's probably enough – you don't need to explain that he was horrified. There is another snag, too: as Karen Olivier puts it in her thesis on the representation of emotions in twelfth-century French literature, "many physical manifestations represent multiple emotions" (2014, 8). Thus, weeping is very common in medieval texts, but a character can weep out of love, fear, grief, anger, or joy. Both the ambiguity of the physical response and the conventionality of the verbal phrase support Barrett.

Besides naming emotions and describing characters' physical responses, what else do writers do? The code of physical responses has led, naturally enough, to the invention of fanciful physical responses. These serve as metaphors for some extraordinary emotion or lend nuance to some ordinary emotion. To give examples from novels of the 1760s and 1770s that construct physiologically unrealistic metaphors:

> During these discoveries our hero resembled a statue or a dead man more than himself. Cold shudders and flying embers alternately traversed his veins. (Christoph Martin Wieland, *History of Agathon*, 1766; Wieland 1986; 315, my translation)

> I hold my little heart like a sick child. (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, 1774, Letter of May 13; Goethe 1973, 10; my translation)

Another technique that allows writers to circumvent emotion words, if they so wish, involves the description of emotion-provoking situations that exist in real life. Writers who use this technique count on readers' identification with the

character placed in that situation and on their empathetic response. "Such a hurricane as then blew it is folly to attempt describing," Edgar Allan Poe writes in "A Descent into the Maelström" ([1841] 2006, 28). The event referenced in this sentence itself evokes fear; readers understand that it is time to start shivering. Don DeLillo's description in *White Noise* (1985) of a plane's near crash landing makes it unnecessary for the narrator to spell out how the passengers felt, because anyone who has ever had qualms about flying – which is nearly everyone – can readily imagine their terror: "The plane had lost power in all three engines, dropped from thirty-four thousand feet to twelve thousand feet. Something like four miles. When the steep glide began, people rose, fell, collided, swam in their seats." (1998, 90)

Imaginary fear-provoking events are a variant of fear-provoking events that, like DeLillo's near crash landing, could occur in real life. In "The Sandman" (1816) in a scene in which a child's imagination colors fictional reality, E.T.A. Hoffmann (2008) lets the dreaded Sandman terrify little Nathanael by acting as if he is going to sprinkle glowing embers in his eyes. In Nathanael's first-person account: "'Now we've got eyes – eyes – a fine pair of children's eyes', whispered Coppelius, thrusting his hands into the flames and pulling out fragments of red-hot coal which he was about to strew in my eyes." (Hoffmann 2008, 90) In like vein, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) the guilty protagonist hears, louder and louder, the heartbeat of the man he murdered and whose body he dismembered and stuffed under the floorboards: "'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (2006, 191)

This last example illustrates yet another technique for representing emotion in narrative: constructing a character's speech or thought in such a way that it expresses what the character is feeling. John Brenkman maintains that "the act of saying and way of saying are the site of affect in poetry" (2022, 392). The same thing is even more obviously true of fictional characters' utterances in narrative. Poe's narrator's outburst, which reveals his crime to the police officers who have come to investigate, transmits his tortured inner state both by his very act of speaking and by the specific words he shrieks. Moreover, a character need not speak aloud to betray emotion through his words. Free indirect discourse or interior monologue will do as well. An adept author can suggest an emotion through the very quality, and not just the content, of free indirect discourse or a character's interior monologue. In *Malina* (1971) Ingeborg Bachmann conveys her protagonist's agitated state of mind thus:

> I'm absentminded, my mind is absent, what is absence of mind? Where is the mind when it's absent? Absentmindedness inside and out, the mind here is absent everywhere, I can sit down where I want to, I can touch the furniture, I can rejoice at my escape and once again live in absence. (1990, 111)

Barrett writes that in the brain, "Affect is in the driver's seat and rationality is a passenger" (2017, 80). Affect has two features: first, valence (pleasant vs unpleasant); second, arousal (how calm or agitated you feel) (2017, 72). Bachmann's protagonist's incoherent interior monologue, which associatively jumps from

one phrase containing the word "absent" to the next, reveals a high level of negative affect that undermines her ability to think rationally. Bachmann's protagonist names what she thinks her mental state is – absentmindedness – but in general, it is unnecessary for an author to name an emotion to let a character's feeling shine through his or her words or thought. For example, in *About People* (2021), Juli Zeh shows a sudden shift of her protagonist's mood through free indirect discourse: "Now that she owns a country house, complete with garden, her friends from Berlin will come for weekend visits, plop down on antique chairs in the tall grass, and sigh, 'You sure have it good here.' If by then she can figure out who her friends are." (Zeh 2023, 4–5; translation modified) Initially, the protagonist's project (a country house garden) leads to a happy fantasy: her friends will come visit her, and not only that, they will affirm with their sighs and words that she has it good and is hence very happy. In short, her efforts will reap plentiful emotional rewards. But suddenly, a negative thought interrupts this fantasy: what friends? The protagonist's good mood is suddenly punctured by doubt.

In all of the examples discussed thus far, the emotions could be named, but the authors opt to employ means other than naming to express the emotion.

Fictional dreams can also serve as a vehicle for conveying a character's emotions without naming them. As early as Sidney's *New Arcadia* (1583–1584) dreams were used as a means of presenting interiority, although it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that this use of the fictional dream began to displace the traditional use of the dream to foretell the future (cf. Martens 2008, 59). With the advent of Freud's dream theory writers were enticed afresh by the challenge of constructing fictional dreams – ones that incorporated the tenets of depth psychology. Ingeborg Bachmann devotes a chapter of *Malina* to her protagonist's nightmares, adding to her repertoire another technique for expressing "Myself's" fears. Dreams present imaginary scenarios and are hence as a technique closely related to the imaginary fear-provoking events discussed above. They could be seen as a first-person variant of such imaginary scenarios. Correspondingly, imaginary scenarios in third-person fiction lend themselves to being interpreted, without too much of a stretch of the imagination, as unannounced swerves into the character's mind, hence as accounts of fantasies or perhaps even dreams.

Finally, there is the device of letting the protagonist's emotion color his perception of his surroundings, so that the surroundings themselves tell us about his mood. In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's influential, widely imitated *Sufferings of Young Werther* (1774), Werther's perception of nature changes with his emotional state. Not only that, but Goethe has Werther theorize the change. Upon realizing that he will lose his beloved Lotte to another man ("Albert has arrived, and I shall leave" [2013, 31]), Werther lengthily spells out to his confidant how his emotions have changed his vision of nature. In his letter of August 18 he describes how his erstwhile glorious vision of nature has changed to a vision of transitoriness and destruction. An excerpt from his account of how he once saw nature versus how he now sees it suffices to show how he projects

different emotions onto his surroundings. Werther begins: "The full, warm feeling of my heart for living nature, which flooded me with such joy, which turned the world around me into a paradise, has now become an unbearable torturer, a tormenting spirit that pursues me wherever I turn" (2013, 38). Werther then lavishly describes how he used to feel once upon a time:

> When, looking out from these rocks across the river to those hills, I used to survey the fruitful valley and was aware of the sprouting and swelling of all that surrounded me; when I saw those hills clothed from foot to peak with tall, closely ranked trees, saw those valleys with their many turnings shaded by the loveliest woods and the gentle stream gliding between the lisping reeds and mirroring the lovely clouds that the gentle evening winds rocked, as in a cradle, across the sky; when I heard the birds around me lend life to the forest while a million swarms of gnats boldly danced in the last red rays of the sun, whose final quivering glance roused the humming beetle from the grass, and the whirring and weaving around me made me look to the ground and to the moss that wrests its nourishment from these hard rocks, and the shrubbery that rows along the barren sand dunes revealed to me the innermost glowing sacred life of nature: how my warm heart enfolded all that [wie faßte ich das alles in mein warmes Herz], how I felt like a god among the overflowing abundance, and the glorious shapes of the infinite world entered and quickened my soul. (2013, 38–39)

Werther perceives fecundity, a plenitude of life forms, and harmony all around him, and he expresses what we might call his bliss or joy – an emotion he likens to feeling like a god – by saying that his heart "enfolds" this infinitude. But, he concludes dismally, "Even the effort of summoning up and expressing once again those ineffable feelings lifts my soul and makes me feel twice over the fear of the condition that now enfolds [umgibt] me" (2013, 39). Suddenly, all has changed: in a contrast that the English translation brings out starkly, the enfolder has become enfolded. Werther describes the present condition that "enfolds" him:

> It is as if a curtain had been drawn back from my soul, and the spectacle of infinite life is transformed before my eyes into the abyss of an ever-open grave. Can you say: This is what is! since everything passes, since everything rolls on with the swiftness of a passing storm, so rarely does the entire force of its existence last, oh! torn along into the river and submerged and shattered on the rocks? There is no moment that does not consume you and those near and dear to you, no moment when you are not a destroyer, must be one: the most innocent stroll costs the lives of thousands and thousands of tiny creatures; one footstep shatters the laboriously erected structures of the ant and pounds a tiny world into a miserable grave. (2013, 39)

Here Goethe elaborately constructs a second scene that is antithetical to the first. Werther decries his earlier vision as a superficial illusion, a "curtain" that hid the true state of affairs, namely a world dominated by death, transitoriness, and destruction. This vision transfixes Werther, who is now caught, "enfolded" in what we might identify as a web of anguish and guilt. His sense of self is shattered: far from feeling like a god, he has become an inadvertent devil, a negating agent, a destroyer of life.

An argument could be made for both of these visions of nature, but importantly, each one is inextricably bound up with a certain emotion. In the story (fabula), the emotion (caused by Werther's sense that he has lost Lotte) may be

considered to have provoked the vision, but in the narrative, the vision *represents* the emotion.

In an essay of 1919, T. S. Eliot dubbed this technique for expressing emotion the "objective correlative." Albeit critics have sought to show that Eliot was not the first to have remarked upon the technique (cf. Griffiths 2018), which had been widely used since the late eighteenth century, Eliot, by giving it a name, made this indirect method of signaling emotion famous. In Eliot's formulation:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (1932, 100)

The emotions Werther describes could certainly be named. Indeed, Werther calls his positive emotion "joy" before launching into his enthusiastic vision of harmonious nature. Beyond mentioning his "fear" of his present condition, he could easily have said (though he does not) that he experienced *anguish* or *dread* after Lotte's fiancé's appearance on the scene caused the sudden collapse of his euphoric mood. Eliot, however, implies that the technique of "objective correlative" is also capable of representing emotions that are too complex or subtle to be easily named. To illustrate, he takes an example from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. According to Eliot, Lady Macbeth's complex state of mind when sleepwalking is adequately expressed through objective correlatives, such that there is "complete adequacy of the external to the emotion" (1932, 100–101).

5. Emotions that Have No Names

In his further argumentation Eliot proposes that there exist emotions that elude even the technique of the objective correlative. Once again he takes an example from Shakespeare. In his view, Hamlet is in the grip of an emotion that cannot be expressed at all, not even through an objective correlative:

> Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. [...] And it must be noticed that the very nature of the *données* of the problem precludes objective equivalence. (1932, 101)

Thus according to Eliot, Shakespeare could not show Hamlet's emotion because there was no way to show it. Eliot comments:

> The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study to pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feeling to fit the business world; the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. (1932, 102)

That is, the artist keeps such intense feelings alive by representing them through what Eliot calls "the world," yet there are some intense feelings – apparently

ones that well up without commensurate provocation – that cannot even be expressed in that fashion. It makes sense that an emotion that is not clearly provoked by a stimulus, and also has no conventional physical manifestation, is deprived of its attachment to "the world" and that the possibility of its representation on stage is thereby diminished. If such an emotion has no name, representing it in language becomes problematic as well. Eliot's focus on "intense" feelings stems from his subject, *Hamlet*; but it seems doubtful that an emotion need be intense in order to defy representation.

Eliot's reasoning is in keeping with the language skepticism that infected modernism starting with Nietzsche: important experiences elude description in everyday language and can only be expressed artistically, through the herculean efforts of skillful writers. Once language skepticism had been articulated, it resurfaced repeatedly in twentieth-century letters. Writers may or may not have been aware of its important early theoreticians: Nietzsche, Mauthner, Hofmannsthal, Wittgenstein. But in a period of rapid change, human experience changed, and many writers came to believe that conventional language was no longer capable of catching up with it. Some things most deeply felt seemed inexpressible.

6. How Some Autobiographers Express "Inexpressible" Emotions

I hypothesize that writers' personal experience is at the base of their attempts to find alternate means of expressing emotion and "not use the rotted names," as Wallace Stevens put it in his 1937 poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Such writers believe that emotion words do not do justice to the emotions that they themselves have felt. They've experienced emotions for which no names exist. Words like *joy* or *anger* do not do the trick. Implicitly, they agree with Damasio that feelings come first, and words get tacked on later. The linguist Maria Theodoropoulou has a theory that supports this sense of the disparity between language and feelings: language is "digital," while emotion is "analogical." Language analyzes, whereas we experience holistically (2012, 444 passim).

Autobiography as well as other types of writing to which writers habitually recur in order, whether directly or through a persona, to talk about personal experience are likely places to find experimental attempts to verbalize unnamable emotions. The quest for alternative means for expressing emotion is of course not limited to these genres; writers can certainly ascribe elusive emotions to characters who are not at base themselves.

Here, I select some examples from twentieth-century autobiography: Amelie Posse-Brázdová's *In the Beginning Was the Light* (1940); Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood* (1983); and Una Hunt's *Una Mary* (1914). How do these writers go about telling us how they felt? It will be seen that it is quite difficult to evoke a clear sense of how one felt without using conventional emotion labels.

In her childhood autobiography *In the Beginning Was the Light*, the Swedish writer Amelie Posse-Brázdová invents metaphors to convey a sense of her emotions. Here is one example:

> From our place at Maryhill, high above the Sound, we had a clear view round the whole horizon. I often had a similar feeling indoors when I heard Mother singing. The rooms seemed to become larger, a lot of doors and windows seemed to have been opened wide. We breathed more freely, with deep, releasing breaths. Though, of course, I could not yet appreciate the high quality of her performance, I already knew that in this "fresh air" I desired to live always. (1942, 144)

Posse is describing what Damasio would call an emotion. She responds to a stimulus, her mother's singing. She has a physical reaction, comparable to her body's reaction to fresh air. Posse uses a metaphor of enlarging space to convey the feeling her mother's singing arouses in her. The emotion is well contextualized and it comes across clearly. Posse's technique could be described as a successful use of the "objective correlative."

But Posse is not always so clear. For example, she writes of a pivotal emotional event that occurs when she is nine years old. She never tells us in abstract terms what momentous thing happened, but resorts to a string of metaphors:

> Within me a great deal happened in the next half hour. First I sat there just longing for mother and for the southern countries she was visiting. But all of a sudden that old, well-known hunger for life seized me so intensely that at one moment I thought I was bursting like an overblown balloon. I wanted to shriek, to ask for help, rush away, far, far away – but remained standing paralyzed, dumbfounded. It struck me that perhaps it felt like that when one was about to die – or to bear a child.
>
> But at the next moment something snapped within me. My eyes grew dim and in my ears I heard the roar of mighty waters. When I came to myself again, I looked about bewildered, astonished that no one else had noticed anything.
>
> And then I suddenly understood that what had just happened to me was both an end and a beginning. Thus must the caterpillar feel when the cocoon breaks and it discovers itself to be a new winged creature. (1942, 372–373)

Here too there is a stimulus – though it consists merely of a longing for her mother followed by a hunger for life. But the resulting emotion comes with a striking physical manifestation: the sensation of bursting, of vision dimming, of hearing waters roar. The analogy to a caterpillar changing into a butterfly testifies that this is an all-important turning point in her life – though she tells us no more about it. Posse seeks objective correlatives. But the reader may well remain mystified. Here the writer seems to be trying to describe an emotion, and an intense one to boot, that, to speak with Eliot, "exceeds its object": that even metaphor cannot reach.

Writing more than forty years later, Nathalie Sarraute in her childhood autobiography *Childhood* likewise experiences an emotion for which no word is quite right. But Sarraute approaches her description differently. She artfully employs but then rejects emotion words in favor of metaphors and metonymies.

> I was looking at the blossom on the espaliers along the little pink brick wall, the trees in bloom, the sparkling green lawn strewn with pink and white petaled daisies, the sky, of course, was blue, and the air seemed to be gently vibrating… and at that moment, it happened… something unique… something that will never

again happen in that way, a sensation of such violence that, even now, after so much time has elapsed, when it comes back to me, faded and partially obliterated, I feel… but what? What word can pin it down? not the all-encompassing word: "happiness," which is the first that comes to mind, no, not that… "felicity," "exaltation," are too ugly, they mustn't touch it… and "ecstasy"… at this word, everything in it recoils. "Joy," yes, perhaps… this modest, very simple little word may alight on it with no great danger… but it cannot gather up what fills me, brims over in me, disperses, dissolves, melts into the pink bricks, the blossom-covered espaliers, the lawn, the pink and white petals, the air vibrating with barely perceptible tremors, with waves… waves of life… (1984, 56–57)

This passage is a masterly example of a writer having her cake and eating it too. Sarraute uses emotion words, in fact a whole thesaurus-worthy array of them, while declaring them all not good enough. She cleverly tells us her emotion is somewhere in the vicinity of "joy" – while it is not exactly that, nor any of the other partial synonyms she names. Her strategy is a variant of the rhetorical device of occupatio – denying that you are going to say what you say. Ultimately, the springtime scene, which starts out as the *cause* of the emotion, becomes a metaphor for it. But if Sarraute had not used the emotion words, but only presented the scene, the reader would presumably have remained rather clueless, in fact not aware that she was experiencing an emotion at all. This passage shows how useful emotion words are and how difficult it is to dispense with them even if you find that they do not do justice to your experience.

My last example is Una Hunt, who in her childhood autobiography *Una Mary* relates that from age 10 to 13 she and her friends compiled a dictionary of 63 new words to designate important things for which no words exist. These include emotions. Examples are "the free, wild feeling it gave us to be out on a dark night when the wind from far away was tossing the treetops, and the shadows cast by our lanterns were dancing fantastically over the blown grass" (1914, 236). Or: "the half-exhilarated, half-giddy feeling one had when, after whirling through space on the swing in the barn until one had 'tipped the beam,' there came a moment of absolute poise just before the back swing, a moment when the heart almost stopped beating" (1914, 238). Or: "the feeling of an unseen beyond" (1914, 242). Three children draw lots to compose the new words out of syllables which they believe suggest the feeling: "Pliditrants," "Mingy," "Trando" (1914, 237-242). But why aren't these kids content just to have these feelings? If they want to talk about them, why can't they stick to the metaphoric circumlocutions? Why do they think they have to find names for them? Of course, their dictionary has the appeal of an in-group project. Yet the girls use their invented words with everybody, not just with each other. The example of Hunt suggests a desire for outright denotation as opposed to figurative circumlocution. Why? Hunt complains, "Words seemed powerful, assertive, in a measure our masters" (1914, 235). Language, as a shared communication system, orders and masters experience. The girls' desire to name their emotions reveals their desire to order and master experience, without themselves being ordered and mastered by everyday language.

7. Conclusion: The Seductive Power of Names

Hunt's account is consistent with Damasio's idea, in his recent book *The Strange Order of Things*, of how emotion concepts come into being. Damasio stresses the desirability of control, and the control concepts give us over feelings. He writes:

> Repeated encounters with the same class of triggering situations and consequent feelings allow us to internalize the feeling process to a smaller or greater extent and make it less "bodily" resonant. As we repeatedly experience certain affective situations, we describe them in our own internal narratives, wordless or "wordy," we build concepts around them, we bring the passions down a notch or two and make them presentable to ourselves and to others. One consequence of the intellectualization of feelings is an economy of the time and energy necessary for the process. (2018, 102)

So in Damasio's view, repetition – the repeated experience of an emotion – nudges an emotion concept into being. Once it exists, the mind gains an edge over the bodily response that Damasio asserts is "part of" the emotion (2018, 110), asserting some control over it. It tames the emotion, so to speak, making it "presentable to ourselves." As for making it "presentable to others," as well as effecting an "economy of time and energy," these advantages imply that we find a verbal label for it.

Similarly, Hunt and her young friends believe that they have certain emotions that have no names, albeit they can describe them to each other in words. Thus, they have concepts for them. Implicitly, this is because the girls have experienced these emotions repeatedly. Now they want to invent names for them, thereby completing the final step in the process of "intellectualization" and ownership.

What conclusions can be drawn? Regardless of writers' belief that they have experienced nameless emotions, emotions too subtle or powerful to be captured by mere labels, and in spite of their ingenious and sometimes very successful experimentation with metaphor and metonymy, there are strong reasons for narrative writers not to forgo names, which have the advantages of communicative power and economy. T.S. Eliot's discussion of the "objective correlative" occurred in the context of a critique of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He does not explicitly limit his observations to drama – he also mentions Shakespeare's sonnets as "full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light" (Eliot 1932, 100) – but his essay focuses on Shakespeare's dramas, and his examples of successful objective correlatives are all taken from dramatic works. Drama is a genre that, according to the classic mimesis / diegesis distinction between works that are meant to be performed and works that are narrated, 'shows.' Narrative, in contrast, however much an author might want to emulate and even succeed in approximating the immediacy of 'showing,' is always under pressure to 'tell.' In the narrative toolbox, summaries are more economical than scenes, and the voice of the teller (the narrator) is not a disadvantage to be overcome but an instrument that can be put to many diverse uses. The usefulness of telling can perhaps in part, and among many other considerations, account for narrative writers' persistent recourse to tellable names for emotions, their historical affinity for the shortcut of naming. Even if certain narrators are convinced that important emotional events

cannot be adequately conveyed by a name, the desire to find names for these emotions is fundamentally consistent with the desire to tell.

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[1] Damasio presents much the same account in evolutionary perspective and in greater biological detail in his more recent book *The Strange Order of Things*, although he drops the term "self," which he thinks led to confusion, in favor of "subjectivity." See Damasio 2018, 282, n. 3.

[2] Flatly contradicting classic emotions theory, Barrett writes: "Emotions are not reactions to the world. You are not a passive receiver of sensory input but an active constructor of your emotions. From sensory input and past experience, your brain constructs meaning. [...] If you didn't have concepts that represent your past experience, all your sensory inputs would be just noise" (2017, 31).

[3] On "basic emotion" theory versus "dimensional" approaches to emotion (which would include Barrett's), see Hogan 2017, 50–54.

[4] On Barrett's understanding of the relation between concepts and words, see Barrett 2017, 136–138.

[5] This article (Lindquist et al 2016), which advocates the "psychological constructionist" theory, also surveys the "emotion regulation" and "emotion lexicon" theories. The latter corresponds to Damasio's view in *Self Comes to Mind* and earlier. The former approximates Damasio's idea in *The Strange Order of Things*, discussed later in this article. Ogarkova et al (2009, 345), demurring, criticizes such "extreme constructivist approaches" for "lack of economic and evolutionary plausibility (given the assumption of constant conceptualization and fortuitous outcomes)."

[6] Otis considers Kozhevnikov, Kosslyn, & Shephard's 2005 neuropsychological study, which showed that object and spatial cognitive processing cannot not be conflated, "momentous," (51–52, 88).

[7] Otis (2022) also gives an overview of literary applications of neuroscientific methods such as neuroimaging. Complementarily, Marco Caracciolo (2022) summarizes the shift from appraisal to embodied to enactive models of emotion in cognitive science, pointing out that most literary scholars prefer "embodied" to "appraisal" theories.

[8] Hogan believes that universal story patterns (romantic, heroic, sacrificial, family separation, revenge, etc.) involve agents pursuing goals, "goals that are themselves a function of our specific emotion systems." (2022b, 335)