

## **Aesthetics of Emotional Restraint: Mapping a not so New, not so Small Territory**

### **1.**

A comparative, intermedial and transdisciplinary approach to the study of emotions has enabled new and productive insights into literary and artistic objects. These recent developments are a by-product of influential contributions such as (i) António Damásio's groundbreaking work on the pivotal role emotions play in the development of cognitive processes, namely consciousness and memory; (ii) the work of Peter Goldie (*The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration*, 2000), who ascribed a narrative structure to the emotional experience; and (iii) Ronald de Sousa (*The Rationality of Emotions*, 1987), who coined the concept of "paradigm scenarios" to describe the social and cultural nature of emotions. Following these innovative trends, the field of the History of Emotions has shown how these transcend the mere individual dimension of a strictly psychological phenomenon and assume social significance, being codified, taught and regulated through several types of discourse, the literary included (e.g. William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions*, 2001; Simone Winko, *Kodierte Gefühle*, 2003; Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History – Lost and Found*, 2011).

In "Emotional Turn? Beobachtungen zur Gefühlsforschung" (2006), Thomas Anz presents a method of studying emotions in the literary text, identifying this new area as a cultural turn that needs to be acknowledged, since its productive approaches are roads not yet taken by literary criticism. This new method aims at identifying possible

writing intentions, and textual strategies, which focus on the reader's emotional response. The author deals with a large spectrum of factors, which include different approaches centred on the production, the text, the context and the reception. These features, which play a pivotal role in the communication process in the literary context, should also be taken into consideration in the broad artistic field, *mutatis mutandis*.

Exploring the potential of this method, emotions in literature and the arts have been one of the central topics of the research cluster Aesthetics of Memory and Emotions (Centro de Estudos Comparatistas da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa); its team published a volume of essays (*Estética das Emoções*, 2011), divided into four major parts: the first one dedicated to the study of emotions from an interdisciplinary point of view (emotions in Spinoza, the immunology of emotions, and emotions in the philosophy of mind); the following sections include insights into emotions in literature, as well as in cinema.

Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), has managed to interconnect emotions, culture, politics, race, and gender, and has explored “how emotions work to shape the surfaces of the individual and collective bodies”. She achieved this through a new methodology for reading the emotionality of “texts that circulate in the public domain”. Her work pays particular attention to how dependent emotions are on relations of power, therefore she adds to an important tradition of renowned sociologists and anthropologists, according to which “emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices”. The tenth anniversary of the book was celebrated with a reprint, which included an epilogue: “Afterword: Emotions and Their Objects”. In it, Ahmed reflects upon a decade of key developments concerning the study of emotions. According to her, after the publication of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, an ‘affective turn’ has been announced. Looking back, she claims her book was a pivotal contribution to what has been called Affect Theory. The latter was best conceptualised by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth in *The Affect Theory Reader*, a volume in which the affective turn is critically analysed in both the humanities and social sciences.

The study of emotions in literature and the arts has evolved quickly and intensely in the last decade. Sandra Poppe's book *Emotionen in*

*Literatur und Film* is an example of this growing interest; one of the most recent publications in this area is the *Handbuch Literatur & Emotionen* (2016) by Martin von Koppenfels and Cornelia Zumbusch, a book that presents a series of essays on the theoretical basis, the historical aspects and the contemporary representations of emotions in literature, including the study of trauma fictions and of “emotional incompetence”. More recently, Ingeborg Jandl, Susanne Knaller, Sabine Schönfellner and Gudrun Tockner (2017) claim that it is not so much an “emotional turn” that we have witnessed over the last twenty years, but an “affective return” (a term coined by Keen, 2011), as emotions have been the subject of philosophy and literature since Antiquity. The relationship between emotions and literature is widely explored in its diverse functions, from the very act of writing to the way emotions are staged, read, or mediated through the literary devices. Consequently, how texts affect readers, their effects and emotional value.

## 2.

After a surge of sentimentality, which found its peak in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European literature and culture, distinct rhetorical processes unfold and Romanticism – its extravagant emotions and bloated conventions – gradually comes to an end by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: Werther, we are no more. The industrial, bourgeois world frowned upon the empathy and the appealing rhetoric of Romanticism; thus new models designed to “cool down” the specific languages of the different arts were progressively introduced. These aesthetic discourses evolved towards modes of communication based on shock, aggressiveness, disgust, and distance, which are still in progress by experimentation and development in multifarious ways in postmodern aesthetics.

The destruction of the affective codes that had been established by romantic writers and artists was the heart of the realist, naturalist, and modernist movements: the radical and dissonant writing of the authors of the German *Vormärz* (Heine, Büchner, and Grabbe); the disenchanting novel that demystified the ideals of patriarchal formation (Flaubert, Fontane, Tolstoi); the socially critical fiction of Naturalism

(Zola, Eça de Queirós). The aesthetic discourse of Modernism is a critical result both of the former movements and of a very particular historical moment in Europe, namely World War I. Thomas Mann's "cold artist", and Hofmansthal's sceptical fiction are cases in point. The radical and enigmatic coldness of Kafka's, Musil's prose, and the shattered aesthetic programme of Fernando Pessoa's poetry are just a few of the most important examples of this affective turn.

### 3.

Bearing in mind the historical evolution of the modern rhetorical modes, there are, in spite of the random and unsystematic research developed in this domain, some important contributions that provide the necessary structural elements for a desirable mapping of the field.

Martin von Koppenfels (2007) studies modern and contemporary literature (from Flaubert to Kertész) and identifies an emotional cooling-off process, which is materialised in the distant, immune narrator's point of view – the "cold gaze". In fact, this tendency draws a cultural path, which unfolded in the post-romantic period and can be described as the desertion of a rhetoric of excess and extreme emotionality. Long before Koppenfels, Helmuth Lethen (1993) had already addressed the 19<sup>th</sup> century "stories of separation" that contributed to both a cultural atmosphere of emotional *coldness* and the recurrent metaphorical use of this term: the ascending course of Rationalism, which led to the mastering of the affects, the modernisation process, which replaced the traditional community by the modern society, and the loss of a religious framework, translated into a feeling of transcendental void, causing a "shock of coldness".

Johannes Türk (2011b) draws a rather interesting and productive parallel between emotions and the immune system: "Of course emotions are not the immune system. But an abstraction from the biological immune system and a re-specification can, I claim, help to understand the dynamics of emotion far better, than the comparison to the cognitive abilities of humans usually used to understand them". Türk develops this comparison into a simile and claims that emotions, in our age of

“immune deficiencies”, no longer play “a protective social function”. Through specific narrative “prototypes”, Türk defines a typology of the contemporary emotional pathology. Taking Camus’ *The Stranger* as an example of the immune-suppression prototype, the author describes the absence of emotion in a fictional character that neither recognises nor practises the emotional language code of the social “milieu” which surrounds him.

Between the two World Wars this antisentimentalist tendency is reinforced – it appears, for instance, in the project of New Objectivity, in dodecaphonic music, in cubist art and in the Bauhaus school. Contemporary literature and arts present a complex and multifarious panorama, in which the expression and representation of emotions take place in many different ways. If there are examples of exaltation and excess, there remains nevertheless also the tendency to maintain the “cold gaze” and the reduction of emotionality.

If Koppenfels’ “cold gaze” is somehow focused and limited to the narrator’s point of view, emotional restraint is larger than that. It permeates the entire narration and the narrative act itself and its goal is metaleptic: it must affect the reader. Thus, emotional restraint comprehends all the textual techniques, strategies, and traps that sanction this achievement. The most common are: short sentences, nominal writing, parsimonious usage of adjectives, and detached descriptions, which intend to show the mechanical nature of what is being described. The same happens in the representation of absurd situations, in the use of narration as a game, and in the refusal of subjectivity. Moreover, irony, and a fragmented focalisation are trademark features. Trauma narratives are a particular case of emotional restraint, since they refer to intense painful experiences that can hardly find their full expression or representation in verbal language.

#### 4.

Empathy (a meta-emotion that contains cognitive and affective components) is a specific affect as a reaction to a work of art, and implies the use of rhetorical devices intended to produce an emotional

effect. Modern and contemporary literature and art present a wide range of variants that need to be identified and described; among them are moments of deliberate production of a distancing effect or strategies of assuming a coldness, which will paradoxically provoke an emotional response in the addressee.

One must take into account the approach that cognitive science and biology (Paul Ekman, Joachim Bauer) have been applying to the phenomenon of empathy, as well as the results of the cross-study of these scientific approaches and the human sciences. The study of narrative empathy is particularly important, since it raises and analyses questions as to the role of literature and the arts in the dissemination of empathy and identification patterns and their respective cultural resonance. In this context, it is important to study the way in which the development of an aesthetics of coldness can carry with it the total elimination of empathy or a severe change in the ways the empathy effect is produced (Keen, 2007; Breithaupt, 2009). The evolution in the media, especially in science and technology, supports this tendency, turning art into a privileged site for a second order observation, allowing the stressing of its cognitive capacity and the cooling down of its emotional and empathic effects.

The use of the theoretical framework and the analytic instruments provided by the cognitive approach to literature, as they are described in David Herman's essay "Narrative Theory after the Second Cognitive Revolution" (2010), have proven to be very productive for the understanding of the implicit role played by empathy in fiction, especially in the case of a restrained representation of emotions. The silences and lack of information elicit a reader response that is always partially the result of an innate capacity for empathy, but is also shaped by historical information and by culturally transmitted affective behaviour patterns. A contemporary historically informed western reader is able to understand, even if only *a posteriori*, the emotional meaning of the narrated stories produced within this context. Herman refers to "qualia" or "experientiality", a term coined by Monika Fludernik; quoting Thomas Nagel, he explains that qualia "arise from the sense or feeling of *what it is like* to be someone or something having a given experience" (p. 173). A similar thesis lies already behind Keith Opdahl's description of the

“affective code” (2002). This concept, however, cannot be conceived as existing apart from “emotional discourse and emotionology” as the “collective emotional standards of a culture” (p. 169), since these provide not only aesthetics but also ethics of experience.

There is still much to be done in the domain of the aesthetics of emotional restraint. This compilation of discrete studies on some of its particular aspects should be envisaged as an invitation to further systematic research.

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