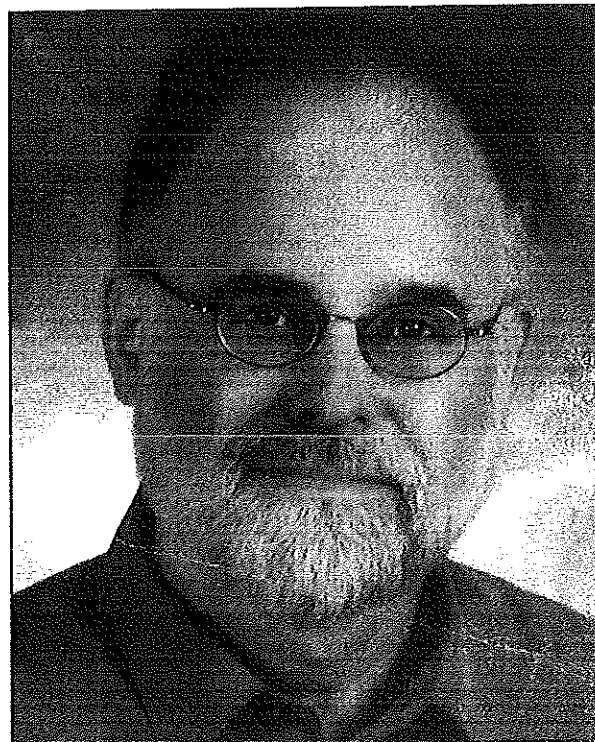


**Who's *Afraid*
of the Big Bad
Abstraction?:**

**Modes of
Conveying Emotion**

by David Jauss





David Jauss

I. BE AFRAID. BE VERY AFRAID.

M

ost creative writing instruction is inevitably negative—
it's a lot easier to tell apprentice writers what they
should avoid doing than what they should do—

but few aspects of craft are taught more negatively than the all-important subject of conveying emotion. The most influential and oft-repeated advice on this subject is, no doubt, Ezra Pound's imperial imperative "Go in fear of abstractions." The fact that he phrased this advice as a commandment, echoing the exhortations of Biblical prophets (and their contemporary cousins, television evangelists) to "Go in fear of the Lord," might explain why so many writers have taken his advice as holy writ. Leaving aside the fact that his admonition to avoid abstractions is itself abstract, it is nonetheless largely sound advice. But the argument he uses to support his advice reveals the danger of taking it as an unbreakable commandment. "Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace,'" he says. "It... mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol." Oh, really? If the writer just said "dim lands," the reader would automatically think of *peace*? Maybe Pound would, but I wouldn't. All I'd think of is, well, *dim lands*.

What does this mean?

- Last words: Goodbyes are a sort of abstraction
" " : Coda - regret, highlight

Pound's advice has been repeated as gospel by many writers and teachers, but no one has expressed it with such fervor as Robert Olen Butler. If Pound sounds like a televangelist, Butler sounds like a pope. Speaking *ex cathedra*, Butler doesn't suggest that good abstractions might go to heaven, the unbaptized ones to limbo, and all the rest to purgatory or fiery hell; no, they're all damned, and right from the get-go. (For a pope, Butler is quite the Calvinist.) "Absolutely never name an emotion," he says in *From Where We Dream*; "never start explaining or analyzing or interpreting an emotion."²

difficult, if not downright impossible, for us to make our readers experience our characters' emotions. Virtually all authors of craft books—including, of course, Butler—have made this point and rightly advised writers to convey their characters' emotions via the senses. Relatively few have provided positive, successful examples of sensory expression of emotion, however, and none, to my knowledge, has defined the various modes of conveying emotion available to writers and extrapolated principles for their use, as I hope to do in this essay.

The primary ways writers can convey emotion through the senses

conveying emotion, I will look first at some of the reasons we should have a healthy fear of abstractions. Although my comments and examples throughout this essay will focus on fiction, my advice should apply to all forms of creative writing.

II. THE MISUSE OF ABSTRACTIONS

Sensory Bypasses



All too often, we use an abstraction as a sort of shortcut to conveying emotion. Instead of creating on the page the physical sensation of fear, for example, we simply say "fear." But

Me, I get nervous when I hear the word *never*.
And when someone tells me never to do something,
I'm liable to want to do it even more.

Q What's wrong w/
abstraction?

In short, be afraid. Be very, very afraid.

Me, I get nervous when I hear the word *never*. And when someone tells me never to do something, I'm liable to want to do it even more. Furthermore, an excellent case can be made for the judicious use of abstractions; in fact, Stephen Dunn has already made that case, and very persuasively too, in his essay "Some Reflections on the Abstract and the Wise."³ But even though I think Butler seriously overstates his case, I'm ultimately more a disciple of his than a reprobate. There are, after all, extremely good reasons to be afraid of abstractions—at least afraid enough to respect them and handle them with care. As Butler stresses, "emotions reside in the senses."⁴ Without some appeal to the senses, then, it is very

body language/and/metaphor/ each of which can convey emotion either by itself or in combination with the other. And, as I hope to show, both body language and metaphor can also be combined with abstractions, for although Pound inveighs against mixing the abstract and the concrete, that is in fact often an effective way to convey emotion—and so, in some cases, is mixing the abstract with the abstract.

But even though I believe abstractions can be used effectively in certain circumstances, I think it's important to acknowledge the value of Pound and Butler's negative advice. More often than not, abstractions *do* undermine rather than aid our attempts to convey what our characters are feeling. So before I discuss the positive modes of

a shortcut for the writer is a longcut for the reader. When we bypass the senses and go directly to an abstraction, we are asking the reader to do the hard work of imagining the physical sensations of the emotion for us, and readers aren't any less susceptible to laziness than we are, so more often than not the reader doesn't take the longcut: she just skips the trip entirely. Either that or she gets lost. (Or my analogy does...)

Let me illustrate this problem with three examples of such shortcuts, all taken (with permission) from recent stories by my undergraduate students:

Jason was delighted.

Trisha's anxiety rose.

There was anger in Evan's voice.

Senses

* We are trying to convince / confront our super ego, in realm of "knowing", not experiential id

Do you feel Jason's delight, Trisha's anxiety, or Evan's anger? Nope. You only know they're feeling these emotions, and knowledge is a poor substitute for emotion. The primary aim of fiction, it seems to me, is to make the readers experience what the characters experience; understanding that experience, if it happens at all, is only a byproduct of that primary aim. As E.L. Doctorow once said, "Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader—not the fact that it is raining, but the feeling of being rained upon."⁵ The three sentences I just quoted don't create the sensations of delight, anxiety, or anger because the abstract words *delighted*, *anxiety*, and *anger* can't convey the sensory feelings they label.

The problem with these examples is that they bypass the senses, and when you bypass the senses, you

bypass the heart and go directly to the head, without passing Go. Undergraduate students aren't the only ones prone to writing such sentences, of course; even the best of us succumb to sensory bypasses in our weaker moments. Often, sensory bypasses star such words as *appear*, *seem*, *look*, *obvious*, *clear*, *visible* (and their variants), words that vainly attempt to give the illusion that the reader is actually witnessing the body language that conveys the emotions the author has labeled abstractly. Here are six examples, all but the last from writers I admire:

Mr. Wilcox... glances at the couple, both **visibly** distressed...⁶

The neighbor... was **obviously** a little confused at first...⁷

[[I]t was **clear** that Miss Price was upset...⁸

He **appears** nervous...⁹

Mary-Emma **looked** frightened.¹⁰

He **seemed** genuinely sorry...¹¹

Whenever I read the phrases *visibly upset* or *obviously pleased*—and I've read them and their first and second cousins literally thousands of times—I immediately want to know how the emotion is "visible" or "obvious." And since a given emotion can manifest itself in different ways at different times, I want to know what particular stage of the emotion is "visible" and "obvious." As Charles Darwin wrote in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, the first major study of nonverbal communication, "Persons suffering from excessive grief often seek relief by violent and often frantic movement...; but when their suffering is somewhat mitigated, yet prolonged, they no longer wish for action, but remain

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motionless and passive..."¹² So when we read the sentence "She was obviously feeling grief," we may not know whether she's moving about frantically or sitting catatonically—or doing something else entirely. For sometimes people respond to grief—as to every other emotion—in unexpected ways. In *A Gate at the Stairs*, Lorrie Moore makes Bo Keltjin's grief visible through his unusual use of a handkerchief at his son's funeral. Instead of drying his eyes with it, as we might expect, he "presse[s] it completely over his face, like a barber's hot towel."¹³ With a sentence like that, we don't need the word *grief*; we witness it.

As the presence of words like *visible* and *look* in sensory bypasses

this is a weakness even the best of us are prone to:

There was terror in the poor man's eyes.¹⁴

[I]t almost embarrassed her to see his eyes so earnest and guilty...¹⁵

The stiffly seated guests looked at me, some with anger in their eyes, some with cruel hilarity.¹⁶

As these examples should suggest, when it comes to conveying emotion, the eyes don't have it.

Glosses *

As a mode of expressing emotion, a gloss is only marginally preferable to a sensory bypass. Whereas a

glosses by other excellent writers. In the context in which each of these sentences appears, the reader should be able to ascertain the emotion through the body language without any additional prompting by the author:

The mother's face contracted with disgust.¹⁸

Indignation tensed the muscles of her face...¹⁹

Sometimes his face swelled purple with anger, and he pounded on the door till he was sobbing with exertion.²⁰

Butler, who argues that fiction should be an "omnisensual cinema"²¹ of the mind, uses the film *As Good As*

Whereas a sensory bypass might allude to body language but doesn't actually describe it, a gloss does describe body language—but then proceeds to interpret it for the reader.

might suggest, we often use the eyes as a shortcut to abstract statement of emotion. Besides opening, narrowing, closing, shifting, rolling, and tearing up, eyes do relatively little that is actually visible, yet they are the most overworked body parts in all of fiction. The main reason for this, I believe, is that mentioning the eyes gives us (if not the reader) the feeling that we're describing body language even when we're not. References to eyes almost always devolve into abstract statements, and as a result, sentences about eyes tend to fall into the category of sensory bypasses. Here are three examples, all taken from excellent writers to demonstrate that

sensory bypass might allude to body language but doesn't actually describe it, a gloss *does* describe body language—but then proceeds to interpret it for the reader. For example, when Stuart Dybek—one of my favorite writers, I hasten to add—says that a character's eyes "suddenly widened in horror,"¹⁷ he's doing the reader's job of interpreting those widened eyes and thereby preventing the reader from fully participating in the process of discovering meaning. Glosses arise, I believe, when we fail to trust the reader to interpret correctly the body language we've described and the context in which it occurs.

Following are three examples of

It Gets to illustrate the problem with glosses:

Consider how Jack Nicholson as a crotchety old bachelor in a movie looks at Helen Hunt. We see his face on the screen; he lifts an eyebrow; his lips curl. If the screen suddenly went blank and the word "wryly" came up, or "sarcasm," or "contempt," how would you react? You can imagine: with great discomfort. For readers who know how to read, abstraction, generalization, analysis, and interpretation have the same deleterious effect.²²

That "deleterious effect" is the feeling of being condescended to

by a writer who doesn't consider us bright enough to interpret the body language on our own. To me, glosses inevitably feel like authorial intrusions, the writer nudging us in the ribs to make sure we get the point. Often, the body language is little more than a feeble attempt to veil the author's reliance on the shortcut of abstraction. And sometimes the glosses take a related shortcut, the shortcut of scientific terminology. References to adrenaline "kicking in" are perhaps the most ubiquitous examples of this, although I've recently come across numerous references to epinephrine, norepinephrine, and serotonin in my students' work. Richard Powers at least has the excuse that his characters are scientists and so more likely to think of biological reactions during moments of sexual passion. But that excuse doesn't make passages like the following any more effective at conveying his characters' passion:

[H]e surges on the dopamine, the spikes of endorphins... They flood each other, waves of oxytocin and a savage bonding...²³

Every program in his body, every enzyme, every gemule collaborates on synthesizing a single biophor: take this woman and kiss her...²⁴

All of these allusions to chemicals have the effect of abstractions, in that they don't actually describe a sensation or emotion but label it in nonsensory terms. What's worse, they take us out of the fiction and put us into a chemistry classroom.

It all comes down to this: glosses don't make us feel an emotion, they only make us know it. Still, interpreting or analyzing body language you describe is preferable to bypassing body language entirely and going directly to abstraction.

But now let's turn to more positive ways to convey emotion in our work.

III. LET'S GET PHYSICAL: BODY LANGUAGE

Let me hear your body talk.
—Olivia Newton-John,
"Physical"²⁵

Action Is Eloquence

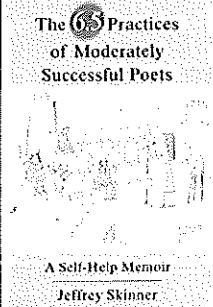
Depending on which scientific study you most believe, 65% to 90% of all communication in life is conveyed through body language,²⁶ so it would stand to reason that fiction—at least the kind of fiction that attempts to replicate life—would have a similarly high proportion of body language. But even though body language is the principal way we experience and convey emotion in life, it is largely AWOL from our fiction. My best estimate is that body language accounts for less than a fourth—probably a good deal less—of the emotional communication in most contemporary fiction. Too many of us—myself included—neglect this all-important mode of communication.

But before we discuss this issue further, let's make sure we all understand what the term *body language* encompasses. As the scholar Barbara Korte says in *Body Language in Literature*, body language consists of "movements and postures, facial expression, glances and eye contact, automatic reactions, [and] spatial and touching behaviour."²⁷ Most of these modes of body language are self-explanatory, but a couple might need some clarification. By "automatic reactions," Korte means such "physiological and physio-chemical reactions" as "trembling, change in skin colour, perspiration, etc." And by "spatial" behavior, she means the proximity of the characters, the way they "arrange themselves in relation to each other."²⁸ For example, if a woman says "I love you" to a man while standing directly in front of

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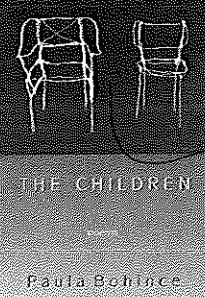
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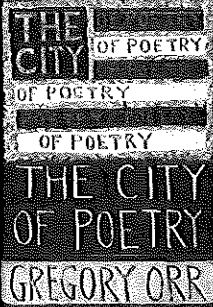
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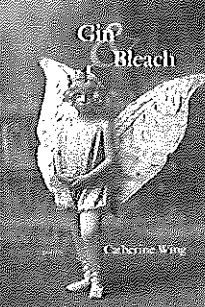
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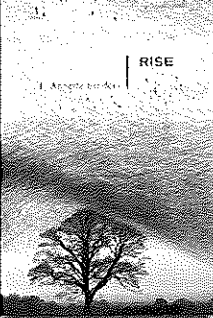
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him and looking into his eyes, that sentence will mean something other than it would if she said it to him from across the room with her back turned to him.

The base function of body language is to reveal emotion in a sensory way.

We don't need a gloss to understand what emotions the following characters are feeling:

[H]e let his eyes roam from my keggy thighs, to my hips, up to my stuffed blouse. As he looked, his fine nostrils opened. I'm telling you he was breathing hard.²⁹

Maples stabbed the ice in his drink with his straw.³⁰

When I open my arms to embrace him he takes a step backward.³¹

Nor do we need a gloss to know what the characters are feeling in this scene from Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*:

Colin had brought the joint indoors for Mary, and she had refused it—a quick murmur of “No thanks”—without turning in her seat. He lingered behind her, staring into the mirror with her, trying to catch her eye. But she looked straight ahead at herself and continued to brush her hair. He traced the line of her shoulder with his finger. Sooner or later, the silence would have to break. Colin turned to leave, and changed his mind. He cleared his throat, and rested his hand firmly on her shoulder... if he moved away now, having touched her, she might, conceivably at least, be offended... but then, she was continuing to brush her hair, long after it was necessary, and it seemed she was waiting for Colin to leave... Miserably, he ran his finger along the line of Mary's spine. She now held the handle of the brush in one hand and rested the bristles in the open palm of the other, and continued to stare ahead. Colin leaned forward and kissed her nape, and when she still did

not acknowledge him, he crossed the room with a noisy sigh and returned to the balcony.³²

This passage contains no dialogue, but its action is more eloquent than any dialogue could be. Even without the inclusion of Colin's gloss-like thoughts, we would know, from the body language alone, that he is trying, and failing miserably, to restore peace to their troubled relationship.

For many years now, I've made the case for body language to my students by asking them to imagine the following scene: a woman sits in a chair beside a window and while she gazes out, she slowly traces and retraces a circle in the dust on the windowsill with her fingertip. Then I ask them to tell me everything they know about this woman. After the obligatory wisecrack “She's a lousy housekeeper,” they say that she's sad, lonely, lethargic, bored, and pensive, and that she feels trapped in a repetitive, monotonous routine and wishes she could be elsewhere or that someone would come and rescue her from her dreary life. I then reveal that the woman I had in mind—and the woman they have described to a T—is none other than Emma Bovary.³³ And I also reveal that they have proved that Shakespeare was right when he said, “Action is eloquence, and the eyes of th' ignorant / More learned than the ears,”³⁴ for even the most ignorant of us hold PhDs in the interpretation of body language. And then, to indicate just how much more eloquent body language is to our learned eyes than abstract statements are to our ears, I “translate” my description of Emma into abstract summary, as follows:

Emma was sad, lonely, lethargic, bored, and pensive, and she felt trapped in life's repetitive routines and wished she could be elsewhere or that someone would come and rescue her from her dreary life.



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Not enough just to show; must also individuate - characters need action

As this sentence should suggest, taking the shortcut to abstraction is like bypassing *Madame Bovary* and going directly to *Cliff's Notes*.

Body Language and Individuation

The best body language is not only revelatory but individuating, as when Bo Keltjin covers his face with a handkerchief "like a barber's hot towel" at his son's funeral in *A Gate at the Stairs*. If Moore had written "He dabbed his eyes with the handkerchief," his body language would still have conveyed grief, but

water and baking soda. Then she put everything back into the refrigerator. Henry was still sitting with his head in his hands.³⁵

Great literature is full of examples of such individuated body language, but I'll content myself with just two examples. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald conveys a plethora of Nick Carraway's individual qualities—his politeness, his sympathetic nature, his desire to save others from embarrassment, his concern for appearances, a physical fussiness that parallels his moral fussiness, and so forth—all through one small bit of body language. Early in the novel, Carraway goes to a party at

with a white man's child. In an attempt to prevent her murder, she brings three children to her house — and tries to entertain them. The children want to leave, so she tells them a story. They don't care for the story and they're about to leave, so Nancy tries again to keep them there. The body language that follows reveals her all-consuming fear of her husband far better than any direct abstract statement—or more typical body language like widened eyes and trembling hands—possibly could:

"I know another story," Nancy said.... "It's better than the other one."

"What's it about?" Caddy said.

The use of metaphor is another way writers "get physical." Metaphors are inherently sensory, after all, so they can complement and enrich body language.

it would have been a generic grief, not the intense individual grief of this particular man. Elizabeth Strout is another writer who pays close attention to the individual ways her characters manifest their emotions. In her story "Tulips," both Olive and Henry Kittredge are devastated by news their son has given them, but their devastation manifests itself in distinctly different ways, ways that reveal the differences in their characters:

Henry spent the evening sitting in the living room with his head in his hands.

"Come on. Snap out of it," Olive said.... But her hands were trembling, and she went and took everything out of the refrigerator and cleaned the inside and the racks with a sponge that she dipped into a bowl of cool

Mrs. Wilson's apartment in New York and meets Mr. McKee, a neighbor who, he says, "had just shaved, for there was a white spot of lather on his cheekbone." Carraway doesn't mention this fleck of lather again until seven pages later, when he tells us that "Mr. McKee was asleep on a chair... Taking out my handkerchief I wiped from his cheek the remains of the spot of dried lather that had worried me all the afternoon."³⁶ No one else at the party would have done what Carraway did, and thus that act reveals his character in a nongeneric, individualized way.

Faulkner's "That Evening Sun" contains another brilliant example of individuated body language. In this story, a servant named Nancy is terrified that her husband, Jesus, is going to kill her for being pregnant

Nancy was standing by the lamp. Her hand was on the lamp, against the light, long and brown.

"Your hand is on that hot globe," Caddy said. "Don't it feel hot to your hand?"

Nancy looked at her hand on the lamp chimney. She took her hand away, slow. She stood there, looking at Caddy, wringing her long hand as though it were tied to her wrist with a string.³⁷

Mixing Body Language and Abstraction

As I mentioned earlier, mixing the abstract and the concrete can, despite the objections of Pound and Butler, be a valuable way to convey emotion. As proof, I offer one of Butler's own stories, the nearly novella-length "The American Couple," from his Pulitzer

Prize-winning collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. This story was clearly written before he descended from the mountain with the commandment to never name, explain, analyze, or interpret an emotion. Throughout the story, his narrator constantly interprets the body language of the people around her, and at one point she is even able to extrapolate the contents of a conversation between her husband and another man merely by witnessing, from a distance, their body language.³⁸ The story not only uses a great deal of body

language, but it is also in many ways *about* body language and what it communicates to us. The presence of abstraction in this story doesn't harm it; it complicates and enriches it. Indeed, if we stripped the abstract interpretations and analyses from the story, it would shrivel up and die.

What Butler's story reveals is that, sometimes, mixing the abstract and the concrete doesn't dilute the effect of the concrete, it *vivifies* the abstraction—in other words, by naming an emotion abstractly *and* conveying it sensorily, we can "import" physical sensation into

the abstraction and make readers feel what they would otherwise only know. In some cases, then, linking an abstraction to body language goes beyond being a mere gloss and conveys what the body language and context alone could not possibly convey. Butler's story contains seventy-five pages of excellent examples; here is a typical—and typically wonderful—one:


[T]he wife lowered her book and her head angled slightly to the side and there was something around her eyes and mouth that was very hard to read. Like she loved this man and was distressed by him in such equal parts that there was only something very small and placid that she could ever show about him. Or maybe even feel.³⁹

If Butler had "gone in fear of abstractions," this passage would read, "The wife lowered her book and her head angled slightly to the side." How much of her emotion would this description of her body language allow you to feel? And how interested would you be in the story's first-person narrator if she didn't interpret the body language she witnesses? My guess is that your answer to both questions would be "Very little."

IV. GETTING PHYSICAL THROUGH METAPHOR

Mixing Metaphor and Body Language

The use of metaphor is another way writers "get physical." Metaphors are inherently sensory, after all, so they can complement and enrich body language. Diane Schoemperlen's story "Body Language" illustrates this use of metaphor superbly. As its title suggests, this story is, like Butler's "The American Couple," as much about body language as it is about its characters. The protagonist of the story suspects that his wife is having

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an affair but doesn't dare ask her, lest his suspicions be confirmed, so he spends the entire story attempting to understand, through her body language, what she is thinking and feeling. As Schoemperlen writes, "For now, as long as nobody speaks the words aloud, he can concentrate instead upon the language of her ankles, elbows, that small round bone protruding at the wrist... for now, he need listen only to her body..."⁴⁰ But although the story focuses on body language, it also contains numerous metaphors that work with the body language to convey emotion. Here

that feeling. Similarly, Julie Orringer conveys anxiety superbly in her story "Care" with her sentence "There's a hot fast clawing inside her chest,"⁴³ and Strout conveys a character's confusion in "Incoming Tide" by saying "The inside of his head began to feel as choppy as the surf before him."⁴⁴ The work of our best writers is replete with similar examples.

Mixing Metaphor and Abstraction

Like body language, sensory metaphors can be used to vivify

guts was gone...⁴⁷

The jolt of fear had burned all the red out of my blood.⁴⁸

Olive had almost spit, her fury's door flung open.⁴⁹

Fear and sorrow flared up simultaneously like fires that put each other out.⁵⁰

Guilt and lust had grown in him like twin tumors.⁵¹

As these examples suggest, the principal advantage of using metaphor and/or body language in conjunction with an abstraction is

One of the principal problems with abstractions is that they're one-size-fits-all; they are umbrella terms, as generic as possible, and so don't convey different gradations of an emotion.

is my favorite example: "On a bad day she doesn't exactly push him away but turns, gracefully, out of his embrace like a ring once stuck on a finger magically removed with soap."⁴¹ What better way to convey his fear that his wife will leave him than to compare her body language to the removal of a ring?

In his story "Mission," Eric Puchner gives us another excellent example of a metaphor that works with body language to convey a feeling. "Later that night," he writes, "Nils woke from a dream, his heart clocking in his throat."⁴² Puchner doesn't need to say the word *panic*; the metaphor—the heart as a clock, the pulse of blood through veins as the clock's ticking—combines with the internal body language to convey not only the feeling of panic but the intensity of

abstractions. Take this passage from Lorrie Moore, for example: "Here Sarah looked at me mischievously, her look a complicated room one might wander through, exploring for quite some time if there were any time."⁴⁵ If Moore had merely said, "Here Sarah looked at me mischievously," she would have been guilty of writing a gloss and the emotion labeled by the abstract evaluation *mischievously* would have been dead on arrival. The metaphor brings it to life.

Here are some other sentences that successfully use metaphors in conjunction with abstractions (and, sometimes, body language) to convey a variety of emotional states:

A soggy despair seeped into Nils's bones.⁴⁶

The anger that had swarmed in his

to make the abstract idea become something we can feel—to make the word become flesh. As Flannery O'Connor has said, fiction is "an incarnational art,"⁵² and despite the arguments against abstraction by Pound and Butler (and yours truly), I believe mixing the abstract and the concrete is a technique that can, when used with care, enable that incarnation to take place.

Metaphor and Particularization

There is another important advantage of using a metaphor in conjunction with an abstraction: just as body language can individuate a character, so metaphor can particularize an abstraction. One of the principal problems with

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abstractions is that they're one-size-fits-all; they are umbrella terms, as generic as possible, and so don't convey different gradations of an emotion. For example, the sentence "He felt despair" doesn't convey a particular kind or level of despair, much less how the despair felt. And adjectives that convey the relative intensity of the emotion don't help much either, as when DeMarinis refers to "small panic"⁵³ or Moore describes a character as looking "fantastically sad."⁵⁴ Good writers—and DeMarinis and Moore are of course among our best—are more successful when they particularize abstractions through the use of metaphors and/or body language.

Anthony Doerr obviously felt the need to distinguish between different kinds of joy when he wrote "a kind of joy splits his lips,"⁵⁵ but neither the word "kind" nor the lip-splitting smile can convey the particular kind of joy his character is feeling. Strout likewise acknowledges that there are different kinds of happiness when she writes, "[H]e could not have said why this gave him the particular kind of happiness it did, like liquid gold being poured through him."⁵⁶ Thanks to the use of this simile, however, she is better able to convey her character's particular kind of happiness than Doerr was able to convey his character's particular kind of joy. And Doerr himself does a better job of conveying a particular kind of joy in other stories, when he calls on metaphors to help him convey it. In "Mknondo," for example, he writes "joy founted up,"⁵⁷ and in "The Caretaker," he says, "Joy mounts in his chest; any moment his whole body could dissolve into light."⁵⁸

We can best see the particularizing function of metaphors when we compare different writers' descriptions of the "same" emotion. Here, for example, are two writers describing two very different levels of "relief":

Relief came, arriving as a sensation beneath his ribs, like a gentle lapping of the water's edge at low tide, a comforting quiescence.⁵⁹

I feel a tidal wave of relief...⁶⁰

And here is a rough spectrum of seven different levels of panic:

[S]he can feel the rhythmic thwack of panic in her chest, the wingbeats of an insect.⁶¹

This gave me a little scabble of panic...⁶²

She felt panic rise up, her heart stammering.⁶³

[She felt] panic bubbling through her, her face hot as fire...⁶⁴

I felt panic like a frightened goat running around in my chest...⁶⁵

I feel a wedge of something like panic being driven into my chest.⁶⁶

The barks came up from the street with an urgency meant to induce panic. The Huns were at the gate, the tidal wave was almost here, the volcano was about to blow. Every night I fell out of bed in a running crouch, my heart looking for a way out of its cage.⁶⁷

Adam Haslett states the problem of adequately conveying "a certain register" of an emotion very clearly in his story "Devotion":

It turned out Ben too had lost a parent at a young age. When Owen heard that, he understood why he'd been drawn to Ben: he seemed to comprehend a certain register of sadness intuitively... "I come up with lots of analogies for it [his sadness at his mother's death]," he could remember Ben saying. "Like I was burned and can't feel anything again until the flames get that hot. Or like people's lives are over and I'm just wandering through an abandoned house. None of them really work. But you have to think the problem somehow."⁶⁸

As this passage suggests, if we can't think of a way to convey the emotion

solely through body language and/or metaphor—i.e., if we find it necessary to label an emotion abstractly—we must try to find a metaphor whose sensory connotations serve as an analogy for the abstraction and thereby help us “think the problem.” Steven Millhauser finds just such a metaphor in his story “The Wizard of West Orange” when he refers to “an expression of alarm invading” a character’s features.⁶⁹ That metaphor works because an invasion is something that would indeed make us feel alarm. But abstractions tend

conveys emotion more successfully than the sensory bypasses “I felt rage” and “I felt hope.” It does so, of course, because the tension between the abstractions *particularizes* the emotion in a way that ordinary sensory bypasses or glosses cannot. Ideally, we should try to particularize an emotion through body language and/or metaphor, but there are some feelings that are too complex to be particularized through sensory means, at least without extended, momentum-killing description. As a result, there are times when body

being in the presence of another person’s unknowable **pain**.⁷⁴

[H]e heard the people talk with a **violent affection** about where they were from.⁷⁵

As with the other modes of conveying emotion we’ve discussed, this technique often works best in combination with other techniques. Haslett combines conjoined abstractions and body language to excellent effect when he says “I let out a moan of **relief** as the **pain** shot up my spine,”⁷⁶ and Moore combines them wittily with metaphor when

For now, I’ll just say, All right, Ezra; let’s go in fear of abstractions, but let’s fear that fear even more.

Let’s go forward, with our chins up, not turn and run away; let’s master the fear, not give in to it.

to be even more effective when the metaphors we choose to express them are not only appropriate but *surprising*, as when Frederick Exley says, “For days I lived in a cocoon of rage”⁷⁰ and Strout says, “Hope was a cancer inside him”⁷¹: it’s a pleasant and instructive shock to realize that sometimes rage can be a comfort, and hope, which we normally think of as comforting, a torment.

V. CONJOINED ABSTRACTIONS

Just as joining seemingly opposed abstractions and metaphors is often an effective way to convey emotion, so, too, is joining seemingly opposed abstractions. Obviously, saying “Rage comforted me” or “Hope tormented me” doesn’t convey emotion as sensually, and therefore as effectively, as comparing rage to a cocoon or hope to cancer, but it certainly

language and even metaphor fail us, and that’s when we need to turn to conjoined abstractions.

By revealing the complexity of an emotion, conjoined abstractions can elevate sensory bypasses into something that comes closer to conveying particular experience. The statement “I felt peaceful” is a run-of-the-mill sensory bypass, and so is the statement “I felt depressed.” But Moore’s sentence “I lay there in bed in a peaceful form of depression”⁷² is a sensory bypass of a much higher order, one that homes in on a complexity of feeling that cannot be captured by body language or metaphor, either solely or together. The same is true, I believe, of the following examples:

A **thrill of anxiety** rose in Rebecca...⁷³

He experienced a familiar **comfort**

she says, “His face bore a look I’d seen before: it was one of **bravado** laced with **doom**, like fat in meat.”⁷⁷ And in *Roger’s Version*, John Updike combines the abstractions *furios* and *tedium* with both body language and metaphor in the following passage, which, thanks to the multiplicity of techniques it employs, is one of the rare instances in fiction in which a description of eyes successfully conveys emotion:

She looked up at me, my dear feminist manqué, and there was a glaze: a big-eyed white fish had swum up close to the green aquarium glass and let escape a flash of her **furios tedium** at going around and around in this tank every day.⁷⁸

I hope the examples I have given both here and earlier in this essay are sufficient evidence that abstractions,

when handled wisely, can be highly effective means to convey emotion.

VI. SOME CAVEATS

As I hope I've shown, there are many dangers involved in the use of abstractions, but there are also important and valuable ways around those dangers. It remains to point out the dangers involved in the use of body language and metaphor, for as essential as they are in conveying emotion, their misuse or misunderstanding can cause serious problems in our work.

The principal danger involved in the use of metaphor is that we'll overdo it and the metaphor will swamp the emotion rather than buoy it up. Strout is usually masterful at conveying emotion through metaphors, but at times she goes overboard. Witness her cheesy—literally and metaphorically—


description of Olive Kittredge's late-life sexual relationship with a man named Jack: "Olive pictured two slices of Swiss cheese pressed together, such holes they brought to this union—what pieces life took out of you."⁷⁹

We also need to keep in mind that metaphors have different meanings and effects in different cultures. An insulting metaphor in one culture can be laughable in another. It's hard, for example, for an American reader to respond with anything but laughter when the Chinese characters in Ha Jin's great story "Saboteur" angrily call people "Egg of a tortoise!" and "An arrogant son of a rabbit."⁸⁰

Body language is even less universal than metaphor, so we have to be aware that readers from another culture may misunderstand our characters' body language. As the scholar Otto Klineberg has noted, "The sentence 'Her eyes grew round and opened wide' would probably

suggest to most of us surprise or fear; to the Chinese it usually means anger." And our eyes would probably widen with surprise to learn that the Chinese express surprise by stretching out their tongues.⁸¹

What's more, body language doesn't always mean the same thing within any given culture—witness the fact that, as Korte says, "there are tears of joy as well as tears of sadness."⁸² As a result, it is essential to consider the context, as well as culture, in which the body language occurs. And of course the meaning of body language within a given culture also changes over time, so we must take that fact into account as well. "In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," Korte notes, "folded arms... were a common display of melancholy,"⁸³ but they no longer carry that connotation. And as Korte has also pointed out, to understand a key moment in Henry James's *The*



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Portrait of a Lady, we need to know a rule of propriety that is now obsolete: the rule that a man must stand in the presence of a standing lady unless he is in an intimate relationship with her. It is through the breach of this rule that Isabel Archer's husband Osmond inadvertently reveals to her that he has been having an affair with Madame Merle.⁸⁴ James says little more than that "Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back" and this seemingly minor bit of stage direction provokes a realization—"a sudden flicker of light"⁸⁵—that changes Isabel, and her life, significantly.

Perhaps the principal danger we face with body language is that it will

accurate and not cartoonishly exaggerated, there is the danger of overdoing it. The result is a boring naturalism, an attempt to do at length on the page what a film can do in an instant. Also, as Michael Irwin has said, "The exhaustive description... is false to the psychology of perception. We tend not to notice what is not exceptional."⁸⁷ As a result, overdoing body language can destroy the very realism it intends to foster. And if we're too naturalistic, the forward momentum of the narrative is also compromised. Thomas Love Peacock mocks this naturalistic blow-by-blow approach to body language, and reveals its momentum-killing effects, in the following passage from *Nightmare Abbey*:

accurate description of a pensive attitude.⁸⁸

So does this mean we should just say "Scythrop looked pensive"? Butler would say no, in thunder, and I'd say no, too, only a little more quietly. But I'd also say, contra Butler and Pound, that abstractions *can* play a valid, and valuable, role in conveying emotion.

VII. CONCLUSION

So far we have discussed the most prevalent, and useful, means of conveying emotion—body language, metaphor, and, sometimes at least, abstraction—but these are hardly the only means by which we convey emotion in fiction. A fuller

Even if our body language is accurate and not cartoonishly exaggerated, there is the danger of overdoing it. The result is a boring naturalism, an attempt to do at length on the page what a film can do in an instant.

seem cartoonishly exaggerated, like the gestures of bad actors in silent movies. In *Await Your Reply*, Dan Chaon turns this vice into a virtue in his depiction of John Russell, a character who expresses his surprise at seeing Miles, one of the book's three protagonists, for the first time in ten years by "put[ting] his palms against his cheeks, comically miming surprise." Chaon adds: "Miles had forgotten about John Russell's odd, nerdy gestures, as if he had learned about emotions from the anime cartoons and video games he used to love."⁸⁶ The problem, of course, is that so many of us write body language as crudely as John Russell performs it.

Even if our body language is

The whole party followed, with the exception of Scythrop, who threw himself into his arm-chair, crossed his left foot over his right knee, placed the hollow of his left hand on the interior ankle of his left leg, rested his right elbow on the elbow of the chair, placed the ball of his right thumb against his right temple, curved the forefinger along the upper part of the forehead, rested the point of the middle finger on the bridge of his nose, and the points of the two others on the lower part of the palm, fixed his eyes intently on the veins in back of his left hand, and sat in this position like the immovable Theseus... We hope the admirers of the *minutiae* in poetry and romance will appreciate this

exploration of the subject would discuss the role of the sensory aspects of language itself—assonance, consonance, pitch, tempo, and rhythm—as well as such techniques as synesthesia, hyperbole, repetition, juxtaposition of images, and shifts in tense, person, and point of view. It would also address Gertrude Stein's assertion that "sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are."⁸⁹ But these are subjects for another essay. For now, I'll just say, All right, Ezra; let's go in fear of abstractions, but let's fear that fear even more. Let's go forward, with our chins up, not turn and run away; let's master the fear, not give in to it. For scary though they be, abstractions can complement

body language and metaphor and, sometimes, even take their place in ways that enrich the emotional experience of our readers. AWP

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