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# The Language of Pain

BY RICHARD SELZER

**W**hy do you write so much about pain? they ask me. To give it a name, I reply. And I am not sure what I mean. I try again: In October, when the leaves have fallen from the trees, you can see farther into the forest. Now do you see? No? Well, what is your notion of pain? Pain is fire, a ravening, insatiable thing that insists upon utter domination; it is the occasion when the body reasserts itself over the mind; the universe contracts about the part that hurts; if the pain is not placated with analgesics, it will devour the whole organism. Only then will it too be snuffed. Still, pain is revelatory; in the blaze of it, one might catch a glimpse of the truth about human existence.

It was the poet Rilke who wrote that the events of the body cannot be rendered in language. Surely this is so with pain as with its opposite, orgasm. These extremes of sensation remain beyond the power of language to express. Say that a doctor is examining a patient who is in pain. The doctor needs to know the exact location of the pain and its nature. Is the pain sharp or dull? Steady or intermittent? Does it throb or pulse? Is it stabbing? A heavy pressure? Crampy? Does it burn? Sting? All these questions the doctor asks of the patient. But there is no wholly adequate way for the sufferer to portray his pain other than to cry out. In order to convey his pain, the patient, like the writer, must resort to metaphor, simile, imagery: "You want to know what it's like? It's as if someone were digging in my ribs with a shovel." "It feels as if there's a heavy rock on my chest."

Years ago as a doctor and more recently as a writer, I declared my faith in images—the human fact placed near a superhuman mystery, even if both are illusions of the senses. Diagnosis, like writing, calls for the imagination and the skill to discover things not seen, things that hide themselves under the shadow of natural objects. It is the purpose of the writer and the doctor to fix these unseen phenomena in words, thereby presenting to plain sight what did not actually exist until he arrived. Much as a footprint hides beneath a foot until a step is taken.

By using metaphor and imagery, the patient brings the doctor into a state of partial understanding of his pain. In order to express it fully, he would have to cry out in a language that is incomprehensible to anyone else. This language of pain has no consonants, but consists only of vowels: ow! aiee! oy! oh! These are the sounds the sufferer makes, each punctuated by grunts, hiccoughs, sobs, moans, gasps. It is a self-absorbed language that might have been the first ever uttered by prehistoric man. Perhaps it was learned from animals. These howled vowels have the eloquence of the wild, the uncivilized, the atavistic. Comprehension is instantaneous, despite the absence of what we call words. It is a mode of expression beyond normal language. Nor could it be made more passionate or revelatory by the most gifted writer. Not even by Shakespeare.

But what is the purpose of these cries of pain? Wouldn't silence be as eloquent? For one thing, the loud, unrestrained pouring forth of vowels is useful in attracting the

attention of anyone within earshot who might come to the assistance of the sufferer. Vowels carry farther than consonants and are easier to mouth, requiring only the widely opened jaws, without the more complex involvement of tongue, teeth, and palate that the speaking of consonants requires. Guiseppe Verdi knew that and made his librettist write lines full of easily singable vowels and diphthongs. It is the sung vowel that carries to the last row of La Scala. The consonants are often elided or faked by the singers who know that consonants are confined to the immediate vicinity of the stage and are altogether less able to be infused with emotive force. It comes as no surprise that the greatest opera singers are in the Italian repertoire—Italian, a language dripping with vowels and in which there is scarcely a word that does not end in one. “Mille serpi divoranmi il petto,” sings the anguished Alfredo upon learning of the sacrifice made by his beloved Violetta in *La Traviata*. The translation—“A thousand snakes are eating my breast”—simply won’t do.

One purpose of these cries of pain, then, might be to summon help, to notify fellow members of the tribe of one’s predicament so that they will come running. But I think there is more to it than that. For the sufferer, these outcries have a kind of magical property of their own, offering not only an outlet for the emotion but a means of letting out the pain. Hollering, all by itself, gives a measure of relief. To cry out ow! or aie! requires that the noise be carried away from the body on a cloud of warm, humid air that had been within the lungs of the

sufferer. The expulsion of this air, and with it, the sound, is an attempt to exteriorize the pain, to dispossess oneself of it, as though the vowels of pain were, in some magical way, the pain itself. It is not hard to see why the medieval church came to believe that a body, writhing and wracked and uttering unearthly, primitive cries, was possessed by devils. Faced with such a sufferer, authorities of the church deemed exorcism both necessary and compassionate.

**G**o ahead and holler,” says the nurse to the patient. “You’ll feel better. Don’t hold it in.” It is wise advice that has been passed down through the millennia of human suffering. But even these ululations cannot really convey to the reader what the sufferer is feeling, for they



*La Colique*, by Honoré Daumier (1833)

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are not literature. To write *ow* or *aiee* on a page is not an art. The language of pain, then, is the most exclusive of tongues, spoken and understood by an elite of one. Hearing it, we shudder, out of sympathy for the sufferer, but just as much out of the premonition that each of us shall know this language in our time. Our turn will come. It is a fact that within moments of having been relieved of this pain, sufferers are no longer fluent in this language. They have already forgotten it, all but an inkling or two, and are left with a vague sense of dread, a recollection that the pain was awful, a fear that it might return.

In lieu of language, the doctor seems to diagnose by examining the body and its secretions—urine, blood, spinal fluid—and by using a number of ingenious photographic instruments. A last resort would be the laying open of the body for exploratory surgery. Fifty years ago, it was to the corpse that the doctor went for answers. Ironic that life should have provided concealment and death be revelatory. Even now, it is only in the autopsy room that the true courage of the human body is apparent, the way it carries on in the face of all odds: arteriosclerosis, calculi, pulmonary fibrosis, softening of the brain. And still the body goes on day after day, bearing its burdens, if not jauntily, at least with acceptance and obedience until at last it must sink beneath the weight of those burdens and come to the morgue where its faithfulness can be observed and granted homage.

**T**here is about pain that which exhilarates even as it appalls, as Emily Dickinson has written. Pain is the expression of the dark underside of the body. As such, the sight of the wound, the sound of the outcry it produces, stir the imagination in a way that pleasure never can. We are drawn to the vicinity of pain by the hint of danger and death, as much as by the human desire to compare our fortunate state to that

of those unluckier. Then, too, there is the undeniable relation of pain and beauty, brought to artistic flower during the Renaissance and later by the 19th-century Romantic poets. It is the writhen Christ slumping on the cross that is the emblematic vision of pain from which has come the word *excruating*. It was Christianity that first tried to wrest meaning from pain. "Offer it up," say the Catholics, as if suffering, boredom, or even annoyance were currency to be paid on the road to sanctity. Simone Weil turned affliction into evidence of God's tenderness. Affliction is love, she wrote. To some, this represents a perversion of the senses, not unlike the masochism that welcomes pain as pleasure. To welcome pain as an approach to God is to negate mercy as proof of His love for human beings. It is an elite band of saints that can achieve ecstasy through pain. Even Christ cried out from the cross: *Why hast thou forsaken me?*

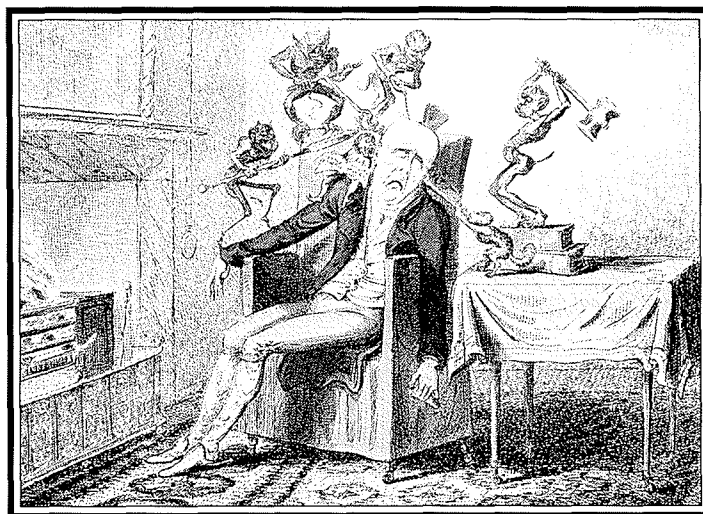
The artist who would prettify or soften the Crucifixion is missing the point. The aim was to kill horribly and to subject the victim to the utmost humiliation. It involved a preliminary whipping with the dreaded Roman *flagrum*, a leather whip with three tails. At the tip of each tail there was tied a small dumbbell-shaped weight of iron or bone. With each lash of the whip, the three bits dug into the flesh. The victim was tied or chained to a post and two centurions stood on either side. The wounds extended around to the chest and abdomen. Profuse bleeding ensued. Then the condemned was beaten on the face with reeds so that his face was bruised, his nose broken. To ensure maximum humiliation, the cross was set up in a public place or on an elevation of land such as the hill of Calvary. In the case of Jesus, in order to deride him further and to mock his appellation of King of the Jews, a crown of thorns was placed on his brow. Jesus, weakened by a night of fasting and prayer, as well as by the flogging and the blood loss, was not

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able to carry his own cross to the place of execution as the punishment required. Simon of Cyrene did it for him. Then Jesus' hands were nailed to the crosspiece, which was raised and set into a groove on the vertical piece. The height was approximately seven and a half feet. At one point, a Roman soldier hurled a spear that opened the wound in his side. To add to Christ's suffering, he was assailed by extreme thirst, as is usual in instances of severe blood loss and dehydration. Once, a disciple was able to reach up and give him a drink through a hollow straw. Death came slowly, from shock, both traumatic and hypovolemic, and from respiratory failure due to the difficulty of expelling air from the lungs in the upright and suspended position when the diaphragm does not easily rise.

I wonder whether man has not lost the ability to withstand pain, what with the proliferation of pain-killing drugs and anesthetic agents. Physical pain has become a once-in-a-while experience for most of the industrialized world. Resistance to pain, like any other unused talent, atrophies, leaving one all the more vulnerable. What to a woman of the late 19th century might have been bearable is insupportable to her great-great-granddaughter. Still, for some, chronic pain is an old adversary, one whose cunning can be, if not negated, at least balanced, by hypnosis, acupuncture, biofeedback, exercise, practice of ritual, and other techniques not well understood. There is that pain which cannot be relieved by any means short of death and which must be lived *against*. Such was the pain of Montaigne who, tortured by bladder stones that occluded the outflow of urine, had to write *against* the pain. On the other hand, Aristotle was unable to philosophize because of his toothache.



The Headache, by George Cruikshank (1835)

Is the pain experienced in a dream any less than the pain experienced while awake? I think it is not. I have a dream that has recurred many times: I am standing alone in the middle of a great empty amphitheater. It is midnight and the scene is bathed in bluish moonlight. The city is European; Milan, I think. At either end of the amphitheater, a statue stands upon a marble pedestal. One is of Caesar wearing a toga and holding up a sheaf of wheat. The other is a great marble tiger. All at once, the tiger stirs, rises to its feet, then rears as if to spring. Yes, it is about to spring! I turn to run in the opposite direction, toward Caesar, but my feet are heavy, so heavy that I cannot lift them. Already I can sense the nearness of the beast, feel its hot breath upon my neck. A moment later there is the pressure of its fangs in the supraclavicular fossa on the left—and again in the nape. And there is pain. I look down to see my shadow bearing the burden of the huge cat on its back. At that instant, I wake up. My heart is pounding; I am gasping; the bed is drenched with sweat. And in the left side of my neck there is pain as if that area had been badly bruised. The pressure of my fingers intensifies the pain that I have brought back with me from the dream, the pain that has crossed from dream to wake-

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fulness. Slowly, my pulse returns to normal; the pain dissipates and I begin to regain a measure of equanimity. But only a measure, for I know that I shall have this dream again, that its pain and horror will be undiminished.

**L**ying there in the ecstasy of having survived, I wonder: Had I died in the jaws of that tiger, died of a heart attack or sudden arrhythmia, died of fright, doubtless my next of kin would comfort themselves with the knowledge that I had died peacefully in my sleep. "He died the death of a righteous man," they would murmur to one another. Had I the breath for it, I would sit up in the coffin and shout: "No! No! It wasn't like that at all!"

Pain. The very word carries its own linguistic baggage, coming down to us from the Latin *poena*—punishment. It is the penalty for misdeeds; one is placed in a penitentiary and made to do penance. The pain of childbirth was inflicted upon Eve for her act of disobedience, and from her upon all those who follow. Immediately upon delivery of her young, a woman begins to distance herself from the pain which she experienced during childbirth. Such forgetfulness is nature's way of assuring the continuation of the human race.

It is at the very least curious that Milton in *Paradise Lost*, reinventing the birth of Eve, has the masculine effrontery to anesthetize Adam during the rib resection. In Book 8, Adam has just finished telling God of his



Who Will Listen to My Pain? by Harry Wilson (1993)

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loneliness, his sense of incompleteness. God has promised the solution. Here is Adam describing the birth of Eve:

Dazzl'd and spent, sunk down, [I] sought  
repair  
Of sleep, which instantly fell on me, call'd  
By Nature as in aid, and clos'd mine eyes.  
Mine eyes he clos'd, but op'n left the Cell  
Of Fancy my internal sight, by which  
Abstract as in a trance methought I saw,  
Though sleeping where I lay, and saw the shape  
Still glorious before whom awake I stood;  
Who stooping op'n'd my left side,  
and took  
From thence a Rib, with cordial spirits warm,  
And Life-blood streaming fresh; wide  
was the wound,  
But suddenly with flesh fill'd up and  
heal'd:  
The Rib he form'd and fashion'd with  
his hands;  
Under his forming hands a Creature grew,  
Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair. . . .

Milton's act of anesthesia is evidence, if any further were needed, that a man cannot imagine, nor can he admit, the pain of giving birth. It is outside the precincts of his understanding. Had *Paradise Lost* been written by a woman, doubtless Adam would have felt each and every twinge.

Many is the writer who has tried to make the reader *feel* pain in a fictional character. I among them, in this passage from an essay on the subject of kidney stones:

Whom the stone grips is transformed in one instant from man to shark; and like the shark that must remain in perpetual motion, fins and tail moving lest it sink to terrible black depths of pressure, so the harbinger of stone writhes and twists, bending and unbending in ceaseless turmoil. Now he straightens, stretches his limbs, only to draw them upon his trunk

the next moment and fling his body from one side to the other, finding ease in neither. From between his teeth come sounds so primitive as to trigger the skin to creep. He shudders and vomits as though to cast forth the rock that grinds within. He would sell his birthright, forfeit his honor, his name, even kill to rid him of it. He toils in bed, pronged and spiked from within. Seed pearls of sweat break upon his face. In a moment his hair is heavy with it. His fingers scrabble against the bed, the wall, his own flesh to tear relief from these surfaces. But it does not pass. The impacted stone cannot push through into the lake, and from there voided. Like some terrible work of art, insatiable it screams to be extruded, let out into the air and light so as to be seen, touched, venerated. Never mind that the very act of deliverance will tear apart its creator.

At last he is able to force a few drops of bloody urine and the pain subsides. The stone has fallen away from the point of impaction, washed loose into the bladder. He is miraculously free of the pain. It is no less than being touched by the hand of God. Still, he is afraid to move lest the lightest change of position should sink the craggy thing into some new part and the hell be reenacted. It has not passed. It lies within him yet, malevolent, scorpoid. It is only a matter of time before the beast will rise again.

Does this convey the pain of colic? I think it does not. No matter the metaphor and simile, all the pomp of language falls short in transmitting pain, that private corporeal experience, to the reader. It is beyond the reach of words; it is subverbal. Just as well, for to convey pain exactly would be to relieve it and to suffer anew. In the matter of pain, it is better to experience it metaphorically than to know it directly.