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The Poetics of the Body in Pain: Wordlessness, Figurative Language and the Chronic Pain Experience

Abstract

Pre-linguistic expressions and literal language are inadequate to describe pain. The former only informs of the presence of bodily pain, while the latter cannot explain purely physical phenomena. Figurative language is thus the alternative to communicate and describe the pain experience. The analysis of texts written by real-life chronic pain sufferers sheds light on the cultural component of metaphors and the conceptual strategies used in the symbolic construction of the pain experience.

Keywords

Chronic Pain, Figurative, Language, Art, Body

Introduction

“How does it hurt?” is the most common question in the clinical context, yet the most difficult to answer. Silence interrupted by screams and moans becomes the discourse of the pain sufferer and constant complaints become the main social barrier between them and other subjects. Pain seems to resist language, for there is not a literal correspondence between word and bodily feeling. This linguistic conflict is intensified when acute pain persists beyond the expected time of recovery and becomes chronic pain. Isolated

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from the world and anchored to their aching bodies, sufferers try to find alternative verbal and non-verbal strategies to express their pain experience and achieve social and medical legitimation. Figurative language (particularly similes, metaphors and analogies) proves to be this alternative. Sufferers disarticulate everyday language by establishing non-literal associations between a purely bodily experience that resists verbal expression and an object, feeling or sensation that exists in their everyday world. In this regard, figurative speech has two functions in the pain experience: a communicative function and a semantic function. On the one hand, figures of speech transform the utterly private, unshared experience of pain into a public one, and on the other, they help understand and give meaning to a chaotic invisible experience by transferring it to the realm of the familiar and concrete. Despite its elusiveness, those suffering with chronic pain reinvent language to escape the world of pain and to *qualify* their pain experience. There is, consequently, a transition from wordlessness to linguistic creativity and this paper analyses this transition. The first section presents a theoretical discussion about the paradoxical relationship between chronic pain and language. Written and visual texts are the main object of study, as they are the most suitable contexts where metaphors, similes and analogies can be spontaneously created and sufferers can freely experiment with language and other forms of expression. Then in the second part of this article, five texts created by real-life chronic pain sufferers as part of the project *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network*, conducted in Lancaster University, are analysed in order to account for the underlying cultural components inscribed in figurative language and the strategies employed to transform the abstractness of pain into a concrete object and shared concept.

Language and Chronic Pain

Virginia Woolf, in her essay "On Being Ill", poetically described the hardship pain sufferers endure to communicate their agony: "The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry" (1947, 15). Love and positive affect imply linguistic creativity, whereas language proves to be "poor" to capture the subject's "daily drama" (15). Nearly sixty years later, Elaine Scarry reinforced this idea, arguing that pain is "language-destroying": "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to

a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (1985, 4). Pain, according to Scarry, un-makes language, triggering a regression process that transforms speech into its most primitive form: screams and groans, not too different from the expressions of physical pain in the animal kingdom. Although Scarry's conception of pain as a language-destroying force was inspired by Woolf's premise, these two authors describe two opposing views regarding language and pain. On the one hand, Woolf's statement is based on the presupposition that "language is at fault and does not provide enough words for what would otherwise be expressible since pain is inimical to language"; on the other, Scarry refers to how "the experience of pain breaks down the ability to find the right words" (Bending 2000, 88). For Woolf, then, the subject in pain is eager to express their suffering, but the English language is not an adequate system to express private experiences. Scarry, in contrast, argues that pain dispossesses subjects from their ability to use language, i.e., the painful subject cannot utter a word. In both cases, however, subjects experience a personal and social crisis.

Language can reflect the different levels at which physical suffering operates. Cries and groans that express suffering are the result not of pain itself but of nociception, i.e., the sensation of noxious stimuli, an experience that is peripheral to subjectivity. The pre-language of screams and groans is not the language of pain, but the primitive and unconscious reaction of the sensory receptors to a painful stimulus. Nonetheless, restricting the relationship between pain and language to their mutual incompatibility implies the denial of the cultural component of this experience. David Morris, in this respect, claims that there is actually a "culture of pain", since physical suffering, despite its intimate and private nature, is a shared concept and the linguistic poverty encountered by subjects in pain is "a common but not devastating experience", as there are still linguistic expressions like interjections ("ay!" in Spanish or "ow!" in English) that are shared and learnt by members of particular cultural groups (1993, 73). Putting pain into words indicates that the noxious sensation has penetrated consciousness, because speaking about one's pain is an introspective exercise. Subjectivity and language are intrinsic to the pain experience as both a shared and a private experience. Pain, in contrast to nociception, is in fact what differentiates humans from animals.

At this point, the difference between ordinary acute pain and chronic pain should be integrated in this theoretical discussion about the relationship between physical suffering and pain. Acute pain sufferers, in spite of

the linguistic resistance, can put their experience into intelligible words, as Ronald Melzack, Patrick Wall and Warren S. Torgerson proved in the McGill Pain Questionnaire (2005). Although the linguistic expressivity of acute pain sufferers is limited, it succeeds in communicating this private experience to a sufficient extent that a diagnosis can be obtained and a cure sought. Chronic pain, by contrast, resists linguistic expression more radically than acute pain. Morris argues that chronic pain “constitutes a radical assault on language and human communication. There is simply nothing that can be said” (1993, 73). Although the McGill Pain Questionnaire supplies sufferers with clear and unambiguous terms that can be interpreted straightforwardly by physicians, these adjectives are just isolated descriptive words, which are not sufficiently expressive and precise for a chronic pain sufferer. In consultation rooms and other social situations chronic pain sufferers “not only have to express their pain but above all intentionally to *communicate* their pain experience”, specifying “*where* the pain is located, *when* they feel the pain and *how* it feels” (Hydén and Peolsson 2002, 326; emphasis in the original). Anna Gotlib notes that the singularity of chronic pain derives from the impossibility of expressing its world-destroying nature in order to achieve social and medical legitimation:

While acute pain calls us to a linguistic expression of something unwelcome and unexpected—in fact, acute pain is often recognized by others through, among other things, a verbal exclamation by the sufferer—chronic pain is often accompanied by complaints that, over time, begin to sound to others less like an alarm, and more like malingering, or, tragically, like a flaw in the patient’s character (2013, 41).

Chronic pain cannot be silenced with sedatives and, due to its long-term, cyclical and intermittent nature, the pre-language of screams and groans is no longer suitable to express and communicate suffering. The “natural” pre-linguistic response to pain is thus “*unlearned and relearned*” in chronic pain by incorporating “carefully calibrated understandings about how much crying is permitted, about when and where you can cry, about who can cry and for what reasons” (Morris 1993, 72; emphasis in the original). Scarry herself noted that “to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself” (1985, 6). Sufferers’ efforts to transform pain into speech show that, even though ordinary or literal language is not a perfect system of expression of purely bodily events, humans have the “capacity for word-making” (6). Thus, in contrast to acute pain suf-

ferers, subjects with chronic pain try to “articulate” their pain experience in a narrative, because “chronic pain does not seem to fracture language and can certainly generate it” (Stoddard Holmes and Chambers 2005, 132).

As Jean Jackson argues, the linguistic problem of pain is rooted in the Cartesian culture, which depicts language as belonging to mind, and pre-language as belonging to the body: “actual pain will resist verbal description because we see it to be of the body and therefore pre-linguistic—like such other sensations as odors, music, or inner states such as hunger or sexual arousal” (Jackson 1994, 213). In addition, Jackson emphasises that some chronic pain sufferers feel betrayed by language since it has become “the handmaiden of the medical establishment” (2000, 165), as happens with the McGill Pain Questionnaire, which appropriates the sufferer’s voice. Pain sufferers, therefore, have a paradoxical relationship with language and wordlessness. Despite the failure to verbally represent the embodied experience of pain and the inherent semantic and communication problems this carries, sufferers do not reject language, as they resort to it to “escape that experience, that world” (Jackson 2000, 167). Language can connect the subjective and public spheres and allows sufferers to express and describe pain in order to achieve legitimation.

The Poetics of Pain

Pain triggers the destruction of language, but it also fuels linguistic creativity. Although pain resists entering the symbolic realm (Kleinman *et al.* 1994, 7–8), figurative language can bridge the linguistic and conceptual voids in the sufferer’s vocabulary and cognition. As Lucy Bending claims, “[w]ords alone cannot come close to a literal description of such pain, and the only language available to the writer is that of analogy” (2000, 107). In this sense, language is only suitable and “eloquent” when pain can be metaphorised (Jackson 2000, 163). According to Mani Jackson, because there is not a proper “language of pain”, sufferers “must recruit metaphors or similes: knifelike, killing, burning” to describe their pain experience (2003, 2). Figurative speech is thus the result of the disarticulation of language and meanings to express non-everyday experiences, like chronic pain. Pain is undoubtedly language-destroying, but not in the sense put forward by Scarry, rather it forces sufferers to un-make and re-make language in creative and even poetic ways.

The sufferer needs to step out of literal language and establish a referential connection between the meaning of their pain and the surrounding world. In this respect, pain sufferers need to transform their experience and

even distort it in order to be able to share it with other subjects. Rhetorical figures of speech are linguistic “crutches”, as Joanna Bourke calls them (2013, 55). They are essential not only to describe pain, but also to shape one’s perception, identity and experience, “going beyond the original association by evoking a host of multiple meanings” (Lupton 2012, 57). Scarry herself notes that pain sufferers generate their pain discourse necessarily as an “as if” construction (“it feels as if...”, “it is as though...”) (1985, 15). The experience of pain cannot be defined without establishing this “as if” relationship between the sufferer’s introspective states and the external world and, although this relationship is only partial and may not express the “real” experience of pain, figurative language provides a suitable approximation and reveals not only the somatic dimension of the experience, but also its emotional, social and affective components. In order to illustrate the relationship between figurative language and pain, it is necessary to examine the linguistic resources and strategies used by chronic pain sufferers. Although several authors and researchers have already dealt with the use of metaphoric language by chronic and acute pain sufferers from a clinical and literary perspective, there are very few studies about the generation of figures of speech to express pain by non-professional writers and artists in non-clinical and informal contexts. In this regard, this paper explores three aspects of the use of non-literal language: (1) the value of artistic expression for chronically ill subjects; (2) the nature of the conceptual associations used to qualify and define the particular type of pain the sufferer is experiencing; and (3) the cultural and historical influence in the creation of associations and comparisons.

The main source for this analysis is the anthology of poems and artistic works collected in the project *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network* conducted by Sara Patricia Wasson at Lancaster University (2018).¹ Its main objective was to conceive artistic expression as an alternative language with which to share the chronic pain experience, since traditional narrative and linguistic approaches seem to pose obstacles

¹ *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network* was a project carried out during 2018 that encouraged chronic pain patients to submit short-form creative work. The conditions of submission are explained in the “Creative Manifesto” formulated by Wasson, who called for creative work on the invisibility of pain, social delegitimation, isolation, linguistic inexpressibility or any other dimension of life with chronic pain. One of the results of this project was an *Anthology of Moments* publicly available online and usable for pain charities, medical trainers and the general public. For more on the project and online anthology, see wp.lancs.ac.uk/translatingpain.

in the communication and legitimation of the illness experience. What makes this project different from others is that the participants' linguistic production in episodic, fragmented or "flash" creative writing was not collected solely for clinical purposes, but to bring visibility to a frequently misdiagnosed and socially silenced condition. The texts selected for this paper were created by amateur writers and artists who are experiencing or have experienced chronic pain. The volunteers captured *moments* of their pain experience. Although the poems and works collected have to be understood as part of a larger self-narrative, they contextualise themselves as moments of suffering. In other words, the poems are a sort of pause in the self-narrative of sufferers, in which they reflect on one specific aspect of their experience, rather than create a lineal narrative to simply recount the story of their pain. This reflection transforms the lived chaos of the pain experience into intelligible verbal and visual texts. In addition, the verbalisation and illustration of these experiences is not oriented solely to explain how the writers' bodies hurt. The primary goal of any type of expression of the pain experience is seeking the acknowledgment of suffering by readers who probably will never experience that type of pain. Sufferers seek to be heard. However, in order to be heard and share their experience, they have to resort to different linguistic and creative strategies to transform an intangible and private phenomenon into a shared concept. In this respect, one of the linguistic conflicts most participants try to solve by turning to figurative language is the objectless nature of pain. As Scarry noted, pain lacks referential content in the outside world: "It is not *of* or *for* anything" (1985, 5; emphasis in the original). D. M. Armstrong—who mistakenly defined physical suffering as a sensation rather than an experience—had already argued that language points out the lack of referentiality of pain, which he categorised as an "intransitive" bodily event (1962, 1–3). This linguistic and experiential intransitivity is compensated for with the use of metaphors, comparisons and analogies which allow sufferers to transform the abstract nature of pain into something concrete, linked to the external and tangible world.

The most common type of associations made by sufferers is connected to the semantic field of war and military violence. From a historical perspective, Bourke analyses the evolution of metaphors in Western cultures and accounts for the "shifts in the way people *sensed* their world and *made sense* of it" (2013, 60; emphasis in the original). Warlike and military expressions were a rich resource for sufferers, especially when pain was conceived as an enemy or invader, reflecting the "increased militarization of British and American societies" in the twentieth century (74–75). Indeed, the term

“painkiller”, used to refer to pain relieving products, is the result of the militarisation of the figurative language of pain (75). These examples show the active role of the sufferer in “defeating” their enemy, especially in an era when treatments for chronic and acute pain were still rudimentary. Metaphors that involve an agent, therefore, frequently imply violence. These types of allegories have survived and become part of the contemporary culture of pain, as Sophie Powell expresses in her prose poem “An Everyday Battle” (2018). This chronic pain sufferer depicts the pain experience using violent images: “It’s a searing pain, stabs straight through the joint like a missile and there’s a battle taking place in there. [...] Good little soldier, that knee. [...] We walk on, the debris of dead bone—dead men—in that ordinary-looking joint waging war silently beneath my skin”. The martial metaphor used by the author pictures pain as an enemy that invades and attacks her body, which tries to resist but cannot counter-attack. By imagining a battle, Powell departs from other common metaphors that envision the body in pain as the actual enemy of the sufferer, i.e., as the producer of pain. In her poem, the embodied sufferer is a passive observer/sufferer of the battle that is taking place inside her.

In pain descriptions, sufferers often resort to external objects to describe pain and more particularly to a weapon, especially when physical suffering does not have a tangible or objective cause, as Scarry observed (e.g. “It feels as though a hammer is coming down on my spine”) (1985, 15). In the case of the poem cited above, the objects that cause pain are missiles launched at the sufferer’s knee. However, it is important to note that the image of the missiles only reflects the damage caused by pain, rather than the metaphorical weapon that provokes it, proving that some associations are more symbolic than others. Garry Coulthard’s poem “Occam’s Hammer” (2018) illustrates this point. Coulthard uses two weapons to describe pain in universal terms: a razor and a hammer. He tries to explain the problem of legitimation undergone by pain victims: “Of an event occurring, it is most likely that the simplest one is the correct one’ / ‘Of an inevitability occurring, the one that hurts the most is the correct one’”. Despite being scientifically inaccurate, Occam’s razor principle, which is the philosophical theorem that states that the simplest answer is necessarily the correct one, is often used covertly in the clinical context to diagnose chronic pain patients, providing an incorrect or superficial solution, since it is not always the case that the simplest answer explains the cause of pain. Occam’s hammer, on the other hand, reflects the sufferer’s subjective certainty, i.e., the sufferer is certain that he is in pain, despite the lack of tangible cause. The hammer is materi-

alised and transformed into the symbolic weapon that provokes pain: "When Occam's hammer falls, / it's not a matter of when or where it lands, / it's simply a matter of how hard it hits, / and if this time you choose to scream". Coulthard deals brilliantly with the problems of communication and the separation between the private world of the sufferer and the external world, where the social and medical discourses often delegitimise chronic pain.

Bourke also notes that other violent metaphors use imagery of objects related to the modern world, more specifically to engineering (especially machines like railways or cars) and electricity (as in the use of the term "lightening" to refer to a sudden pain) (2013, 78–79). This kind of figure of speech related to objects created by human beings has flourished and become an integral part of the language used to describe pain, replacing the tradition of pre-industrial figurative language that "drew on nature and rural life" (80–83). Doug Sharp in "Central Pain Syndrome: Naming the Beast" (2018) combines these two realms, alternating images of fauna and man-made objects:

rats gnaw at the base of psyche,
lick rusty razor blade,
electric flame slice belly,
fiery metal spears dangle from gut,
The great beast paws idly at my entrails,
sparkling shark teeth chew slowly up leg,
thrust scorching metal skewers slowly down meat of thighs,
pack burning steel wool into hollow shrieking calves,
porcupine worms writhe inside veins forever chewing out of meat and skin,
skate barefoot across field of burning blades,
walk face first into blazing buzz saw,
again,
again,
again,
I can feel the flames
but I can't see the light.

Sharp here pictures abject and monstrous creatures consuming and invading his body. Small animals (rats and porcupine worms) are harming both his body and mind, but there is a more ferocious intruder: a beast. This monster embodies his illness, Central Pain Syndrome, and represents the importance of naming for chronic pain patients. There are two forms of objectification of pain in this poem. On the one hand, naming can be defined

as a strategy to objectify pain. In being referred to as Central Pain Syndrome, pain is materialised with a diagnostic label and is no longer an invisible condition. On the other hand, by being described as a beast, pain is symbolically objectified to help the sufferer share this private experience and explain his daily bodily horror.

It is interesting to note that Sharp describes the viciousness of the monster's attack picturing sharp metallic objects tearing his flesh to shreds. Like Bourke, Morris also contended that the contraposition between the natural and mechanical reflects the influence of culture in the reinvention of the pain experience in urban societies. Historically speaking, there has been a cultural evolution of metaphors as technology started invading everyday life:

Pain [in rural areas] is described primarily through sounds from the natural world of birds and animals, while headache sufferers in the industrial world typically describe their pain through images of jackhammers and chain saws. The difference is not merely in description but in experience. A jackhammer headache no longer inhabits the natural world but belongs to an urbanized realm where people feel increasingly powerless, stressed out, and under assault-feelings that play back into the experience of pain (Morris 2000, 123).

The image of tissue damage provoked by metallic objects, rather than by animal attacks, pervaded the collective imagination in post-industrial societies and became the core metaphor in modern western cultures of pain. Electricity, razors, spears, skewers, blades and saws reflect how modern urban lifestyle has shaped the conception of pain. In addition, those fictional wounds that accompany the pain in the sufferer's body are another type of metaphor noted by Scarry (1985, 15). The imagined tissue damage is also a strategy to objectify pain, since it transforms a private and abstract experience into a concrete visual description of how the sufferer feels his/her pain. As regards the sensuous symbolism, the ideas of fire and burning are recurrent in the poem, a sensation that characterises Central Pain Syndrome.

The negativity of the experience is another key element in Sharp's work. From a political point of view, metaphors are never neutral. The McGill Pain Questionnaire proves this point. Commonly used metaphors were collected in this questionnaire in order to create a corpus of pain descriptors which includes terms that "evoke a malevolent animate agent whose actions may cause physical damage (punishing, cruel, vicious, torturing, gnawing, killing)" (Semino 2010, 210). Susan Sontag, in her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor*, points out the impact of metaphors in shaping the illness experience, especially when these analogies carry negative connotations: "it is

hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped" (1978, 3–4). Bourke also notes that the negative representation of pain is related to the decline of religious metaphors, which described pain as "an end, a journey, or a test" or a "punishment, intended to teach people valuable lessons" (2014, 83). Sharp tries to reflect the negativity of the pain experience in the imagined fauna. The monstrosity of the beast mirrors the monstrosity of the sufferer's pain experience and the abject animals evoked reflect the social stigmatisation of chronic pain. The poem concludes with the idea of darkness and the seclusion experienced by the sufferer, who is trapped in his own body with the beast of pain.

The idea of isolation is also illustrated by another chronic pain sufferer, Wayne Roberts, in the poem "Nobody" (2018). The author contrasts the silence of solitude and the never-ending bodily noise provoked by pain. Roberts objectifies his pain as an external entity he refers to as "you": "Except you, / You're never silent, / The voice that never stops, / The endless alarm that disturbs my slumber, / You rattle round my brain in whispers and shouts until I scream". The symbol of the alarm, which reinforces the dualism between mind and body, has been recurrent in the cultural history of pain. Physical suffering has been traditionally conceived as a sign and survival mechanism that informs the subject about localised tissue damage or disease. Chronic pain, however, due to its deviation from "normal" acute pain is seen as a broken or defective alarm, for it does not necessarily point to any physical injury. Thus, unlike acute pain, chronic pain is biologically meaningless. Trapped in the prison of his body, the author tries to break the silence and express his suffering, but he encounters several obstacles: "Outside of this cell walls have ears who swallow my words, / And even photographs in frames refuse to listen, / Because I have no voice". The alarm of chronic pain absorbs the sufferer's voice in two senses. On the one hand, as has been argued in the first part of this essay, the relationship between language and pain is rather problematic. The sufferer cannot find the words to describe his/her pain and can only express suffering with pre-linguistic expressions. On the other, pain cancels the sufferer's voice at a social level, especially in cultures where the abuse of screams and groans is not acceptable, leading to the social, and even clinical, delegitimation of the pain experience. As Morris also metaphorised, chronic pain "seems to build up walls of separation", placing sufferers in "utterly different worlds of feeling" and surrounding "them with silence" (1993, 73).

Other participants in *Translating Chronic Pain* decided to discard verbal language and experiment with visual arts. As photographic artist Deborah Padfield reveals in her work with chronic pain patients, visual metaphors can help sufferers describe pain subjectively in clinical contexts. Black-background pictures display objects like stripped wires with a stream of sparks, a red-hot, twisted iron bar or a knife stuck into a “bleeding” strawberry (Padfield *et al.* 2015, 124). These examples show that the painful experience can be transformed into “an expressive feature, re-linking our bodies to the world” (Inahara 2012, 193). Padfield’s visual and metaphorical representations of chronic pain prove that her pictures can express “more directly than any verbal description the sensations experienced by sufferers” and the autobiographical captions included in her collection of photographs “disambiguate the images and additionally supply narrative accounts of the changing, cyclical nature of the pain” (Deignan *et al.* 2013, 291). One outstanding example of the use of graphic pain metaphors in the *Translating Chronic Pain* project is Paula Knight’s visual work “Wings” (2018), an illustration apparently taken from the author’s diary.

Under the heading “Bedridden since Tues — 4 days. Drawn in bed” there is a minimalist drawing of a winged woman in a prone position. Below, there is another drawing of the same woman, without her wings and bleeding, and the caption “It feels as if my wings have been torn off”. The bright-red colour dominates the sketch, as the blood drips leave traces that reach a real black feather attached to the paper sheet with tape. In an explanatory note, the author—a patient of myalgic encephalomyelitis (also known as chronic fatigue syndrome) and fibromyalgia—explains that her drawing represents the location of her pain and its rawness, and the use of symbolic violence reflects its intensity:

The image also embodies my sense of feeling trapped as a result of my disability, and of having my potential and freedom thwarted. I had the feather to hand because my husband brings me items from outside: The use of a found object is symbolic of my being housebound and detached from the natural world. It also represents a disconnect from the life I’d rather be leading if I were well enough. The image is visceral and disturbing, and it reflects the distressing and very physical symptoms I can experience.

Blood objectifies pain and symbolically links private suffering to the real external world represented by the feather. This artwork shows that visual language is more flexible than verbal language, as it allows sufferers to trespass the boundaries of conventional language and explore a new terrain full

of images and objects that can capture the chronic pain experience in all its dimensions. Visual metaphors, therefore, seem to be more powerful than linguistic metaphors, since patients seem to break down pre-existing conceptions of physical pain and create new ones, which are more suggestive for the reader or viewer. Nonetheless, this also implies that those images will be more difficult to understand when they are not complemented with a verbal text, as in the case of Knight's work.

Conclusions

The literary analysis of the artistic representations of chronic pain selected for this essay reveals the strategies used by sufferers in the figurative construction of their experience. Pain is both word- and world-destroying. Metaphors, similes and analogies create new meanings and reconstruct what is destroyed by pain, that is, they are world-(re)making (Biro 2011, 68). Symbolic language helps sufferers create new worlds with new associations. It is important to note, however, that the associations between the experience of pain and the imagined object are only partial, since sufferers are not actually burning, consumed nor being torn. Metaphors seem to refer only to the spatio-temporal and subjective properties of the pain experienced (Bourke 2013, 57). Figures of speech, therefore, help reinforce or emphasise one aspect or moment of the pain experience, as seen in the poems analysed. Some authors focused on their isolation and solitude, others on the impossibility of escaping their bodies or sharing their experience. Figurative language, in this sense, has two main functions. Its allegorical function helps sufferers overcome the obstacles of literal language to describe pure bodily feelings. Non-literal language also has a therapeutic function, as it prevents medical discourse from absorbing the sufferers' voices and allows them to take an active role in the creative process of linguistic and conceptual construction. Although linguistic creativity is culturally bounded, since many of the figures of speech and images analysed have been inherited from the Western culture of pain, the authors of the works selected have appropriated those associations in order to qualify the particular and unique type of pain they were experiencing at the moment of writing and to express their own existential horror. These metaphors do not only help pain victims share and communicate their experiences; they also transform the way pain itself is experienced. Sufferers, despite pain, helplessness and despair, have power, the power to move from wordlessness to linguistic creativity.

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