51 (4/2018), pp. 13–23 | The Polish Journal
DOI: 10.19205/51.18.1 | of Aesthetics

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Pain and the Affects: The Witness. The Cure. The Healing

Physical pain—in all its degrees of intensity and frequency—is a constant presence in life. From an almost imperceptible discomfort at skin level to the prolonged states of unbearable bodily distress that characterise some chronic medical conditions, pain is an inescapable reality of human and non-human existence. However, and as Virginia Woolf contended in her celebrated essay "On Being Ill", bearing in mind "how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change it brings, […] it becomes strange indeed that [it] has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (2012 [1926], 3–4), an argument we could extend to scholarly writing too. Examples of physical distress and the experience of illness have, though, been present in the literatures of all times—albeit significantly more scant than instances of emotional suffering—but it is not until the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries that they have started to attract sustained critical and artistic attention across geographies and cultures.

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But… why has the body in pain been absent from the systems of representation for so long? Certainly, there is many a potential answer for this question. If visible at surface level—i.e., when pain and illness are manifested in a rash or scabs, or by means of external bodily fluids like urine or vomit, excrement, blood, or by hair falling out—the corporeal is generally considered as abject cultural materiality, as that which we do not desire to see or touch, except in medical contexts, where it is perceived, principally, as an object to be analysed, dissected and/or altered. The body is, after all, a multiple signifier upon which different scales of value are applied in order to construct its manifold meanings. And so, a lock of hair from the beloved is kept as a potent reminder of romantic love, but the fallen hair of a chemotherapy patient is a different symbol altogether, and triggers divergent emotional responses too. If we turn to language, though, the most extended explanation for this absence of pain in representation is summarised, once again, in Woolf's essay: "[L]anguage", she wrote, "at once runs dry" if we wish to describe a simple headache (2012 [1926], 7). Her argument about the inaccuracy of language to deal with pain is persuasive and difficult to disagree with—although some cultural contextualisation is called for, as English is not necessarily the same as Spanish, Italian, Polish or French when it comes to metaphorisation and simile, two of the strategies used to talk about pain by patients, poets and artists alike. Elaine Scarry's philosophical treatise *The Body in Pain* also resorts to the linguistic "unsharability" of physical pain, i.e., to its "resistance to language" (1985, 4), as a plausible explanation for its generalised absence from socio-cultural representations. According to Scarry, physical pain resists articulation through language and even "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" (4). This would account for the scant presence of physical pain in textual discourse—except in medical case histories or reports by Amnesty International (9)—and also for the gap that separates the body in pain from other members of their community, since they are unable to connect to that person's physical distress due to its stated unsharable nature (4).

Scarry's has become a text of reference when critically approaching pain and is, probably, the one most often quoted in this special issue. Although her theories about linguistic unsharability have been nuanced since the publication of *The Body in Pain*—particularly by the counterargument that there is a cultural language of pain, and by literature about care and empathy—her discussion of the imprecision, inaccuracy, even impossibility

of language to talk about pain is still a vibrant one. The motivation and rationale behind this special issue on "The Affective Aesthetics of the Body in Pain" stems from the belief that suffering *does* have a language, particularly in the realms of artistic and literary practice, but also in the genres associated with life-writing, namely personal essays and memoirs. The works presented in this volume find words (academic, creative, autobiographical) where there seemed to be none and act as a witness to realities traditionally silenced and/or marginalised from the socio-cultural agenda, often in order to call for an active interaction between that which is being represented and the readership/audience being addressed, which led us to the second question that has guided our editorial work: How do the affects interact with the bodily painful and what role do they play in the representation of hurt?

The pivotal category of *affective aesthetics* allows for analyses of literary texts and visual art conjoined with an important set of questions about the national, social, familial and sexual dimensions of embodiment. Affects—through artworks—function as forces which enable subjects to move and to be moved and, therefore, they have the capacity to transform both individual and collective subjectivities and to shape their imaginaries. Their interaction with pain resists the mere aesthetic contemplation of the object of the artwork (i.e., the body in pain or the experience of illness) and instead inspires empathic and ethical engagements as well as social interventions.

The sources of the affective aesthetics project can be traced back to a number of essays of the already mentioned Virginia Woolf, most importantly "How Should One Read a Book" (1925) and "On Re-reading Novels" (1922) (Woolf 1994), and to the pragmatist aesthetics of John Dewey (1987), variously expanded upon by Simon O'Sullivan (2001) and Charles Altieri (2003), and further developed by female feminist theorists like Sara Ahmed, Silvia Federici, Selma James, Anu Koivunen and Susanna Paasonen, among others. This interesting theoretical avenue—it being a comprehensive endeavour marrying ontology, epistemology and politics, along with, key to the affective turn, ethics—ventures to re-define notions that are fundamental for the field of aesthetics and encompasses a reflection on the arts as active agents in the production of culture. And so, Charles Altieri expressed his hope that affective aesthetics would offer a fresh angle on the arts which would serve social interest, meaning that literature would not only deal with socially relevant issues, but would also produce subjectivities and change their way of perceiving the world. The arts would then be treated as serious social practice, therefore the analysis of the role of the affects in literature is an action that defines and meets the need to care about

oneself and the surrounding world (Altieri 2003, 33). Feminist philosophers, on their part, univocally emphasise the indivisibility of the affective and ethical components of subjectivity, pointing to irrational and non-cognitive elements as causal factors in the process of building relations with others.

However, if we were to consider affective aesthetics as a kind of cohesive, consistent research-artistic group, we would be surprised by what variegated voices sing in this choir. Affective theorists refer to separate, often even irreconcilable traditions, and, what is more, stress their conflicting perspectives. For this reason, our point of departure for this special issue is rather conspicuously targeted at reflection on the aesthetics of the body experiencing pain, i.e., the body that is located somewhere in the interactions of multiple systems of oppression or discrimination and that is marked by categories of gender, race, age, social class and the species divide.

One of the most important questions for this project is related to the role played by the above-mentioned markers in the forming of concepts and aesthetic values (Korsmeyer 2004). While many twentieth-century theorists and philosophers pointed to the need for a new and broader notion of aesthetics, one which would accentuate the processual, affective and corporeal-sensual dimension of experience (Rejniak-Majewska 2014, 11), at a certain level in their generalisations these writers expunged the notion of gender and sex, species, race, and ethnic differences. A rather contrasting gesture is characteristic of feminist reflection, where the notion of affect is very often presented as "a cosmic force that transcends the confines of human existence, individual body, and human subjectivity" (Mortensen 2017, 7). In our critical assessment of the potential of a feminist aesthetics, neither the gendered body nor the affects are "cosmically" dispersed; they are considered of paramount importance but cannot be perceived as universal and abstract.

The common denominator in all the theories referenced above is a belief in the non-individual character of the aesthetic experience. Obviously, this does not suggest the blurring of the individual, subjective "self"—one that feels and acts—but rather the unveiling of mechanisms which enable the arts to have an impact on their communities. We would like to view the arts as tools that enable us to observe the world in a way that goes beyond our ascribed vantage points as determined by corporeal, sexual, gender, and social-class categories. Affective aesthetics are here understood as a set of tools to assess the different ways of perceiving and distributing the real and/or imaginary spaces shared by a given community, with the aim of destabilising elements that reinforce the divisions. So instead of romanticising the notion of affective agency—supposedly intended to transform the

world—we would like to ponder the question of how social and political structures manage the division and distribution of affects, and how to de-regulate those hierarchical systems of attribution that dictate that particular bodies in pain are more visible and more audible than others.

The works presented in this special issue of *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* explore—from different perspectives, as well as cultural and historical contexts—the ways in which artistic projects shape distinct affective states of experiencing pain and illness. The concept of pain is here extended beyond physical distress to also embrace illnesses that may not have an associated sensation of bodily discomfort. Far from considering "the body in pain" as a unified category, these essays and poems illustrate the idea that each illness, each pathology and each painful body part is the result of individual experience as much as of socially constructed notions of what it means to be in pain or to experience illness. Hence, the collective and political potential of pain is as present here as its phenomenology as a personal and individual experience. In the pages that follow, the turn to illness and the turn to the affects cross-fertilise each other to produce suggestive work on the affective aesthetics of embodiments that hurt and that need to be healed. All the essays share an interest in the perspective of the sufferer, who on many occasions is a real patient. In this way, these articles complement—but are not incompatible with—the medical perspective on the same diseases, which is necessarily more dehumanised and supposedly less subjective.

So, what languages and modes of expression can we utilise to deal with pain and the affects such pain can potentially trigger? This special issue offers some answers in the artistic vocabulary proffered by poetry, performance art, photography, experimental film, narrative, and the genre of the so-called personal essay. We can contend that there is now a solid body of work on medical poetry, i.e., poetry that deals with medical issues. Anthologies like *The Poetry Cure* (2004), edited by Julia Darling and Cynthia Fuller, *Signs and Humours: The Poetry of Medicine* (2007), edited by Lavinia Greenlaw, *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems about Doctors, Patients, Illness and Healing* (2015), edited by Michael Salcman, and *Illness as Inspiration: The Poetry of Medicine and Disease* (2019), edited by Theodore Dalrymple, to mention but a few, prove that poetry is particularly apt to compensate for the inability of literal language to deal with pain.[1] Similarly, the "Hippocrates Initiative for Poetry and Medicine"—co-funded by poet Michael Hulse and clinical pharmacologist Donald Singer—has promoted the special connec-

[1] These anthologies are all relatively recent, but the poems included span several centuries and showcase the socio-cultural dimension of pathologies across time.

tion between poetic forms and medical conditions and experiences at its annual conferences, which also include the ceremony of the Hippocrates Awards for Poetry and Medicine, arguably the most reputed international poetry prize for poetry on illness-related issues.[2] All in all, poetry is now generally perceived as a vehicle to express pain and to connect us to the experience of illness by means of its figurative language and conceptual strategies. However, and in spite of growing initiatives to incorporate poetry as a therapeutic tool in different medical areas, comparatively little research has been done on the curative and/or healing power of poetry for patients in a clinical context. Shadia-Abdel-Rahman Téllez's essay included in this special issue ("The Poetics of the Body in Pain") contributes to redressing this void through her exploration of chronic pain in both medical and everyday social settings. The poems utilised in her analysis are taken from the 2018 project *Translating Chronic Pain* conducted by Sara Patricia Wasson at Lancaster University, and all were written by amateur writers who have been experiencing chronic pain for some time. As the author explains, "[t]he 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". And in the affective exchange that happens between the writing of this kind of poetry (by the sufferers) and the hearing/reading of those same poems (by the community), the writers-patients find a therapeutic tool of sorts, and their audience can experience some degree of empathic connection.

This volume also includes three previously unpublished poems by American-born poet Kelley Swain, and translations (by Lynn Suh) from Polish into English of three poems by Anna Adamowicz. Both Swain and Adamowicz have often found inspiration in the worlds of science, Medicine and non-normative corporealities, and they are both representatives of what we might describe, internationally, as the turn to pain in twenty-first century poetry. Their work is a perfect illustration of the cross-fertilisation that is gradually taking place between the world of Humanities and the world of Sciences, two areas traditionally kept radically apart, to the extent of being called "the two cultures", to use the phraseology of C. P. Snow (1959). The six poems published here inscribe historical figures (like Helen Duncan in the case of Swain, and Jean-Michel Basquiat in Adamowicz's work), as well as the deformed, distorted and maimed bodies of real and legendary characters, traditionally considered as medical oddities but here given the dignity

[2] The Hippocrates Initiative started in 2009 and its most recent annual conference was held at the University of Newcastle on 17th May 2019.

and visibility that is due to subjects-objects of art. The poems ultimately demand an affective response on the part of the reader/audience, who are implicitly asked to acknowledge the existence of those marginalised in the official records of history.

Máximo Aláez Corral's essay ("'I Never Want to Avoid Pain'") and Kate Antosik-Parsons' ("Split Asunder") explore the potential of photography and performance art to inscribe and generate affective responses in their articulation of physical and emotional pain. Aláez Corral examines the visual strategies of American photographer Nan Goldin in assessing the representation of hurt, the constructed nature of pain and, as the author explains, "the power of photography [...] to communicate with the portrayed person's suffering". Goldin's photographs record the experiences of violence, illness and addictions in the drag and underground artistic communities of Boston and New York in the 1970s and, in that sense, have become witnesses to what might otherwise have been falsified under the rubric of more conventional forms of art. The people represented in her photos are posing, and therefore, part of the construction of an art piece, but also immersed in their daily routines without much artifice. Goldin's work ultimately invites the viewer to enter her world from its margins and to be necessarily affected by this journey.

Antosik-Parsons, in her turn, deals with obstetric violence in the context of Ireland and uses as her primary source Máiréad Delaney's performance *At What Point it Breaks* (2017). In a country that has historically silenced the bodies of women, culturally as well as politically, Antosik-Parsons chooses for her analysis an art form that is unquestionably incarnated and embodied. Performance practice takes place in a liminal space, somewhere between the artistic, that is, constructed, and what we consider reality, that is, the most immediate and ephemeral here and now. And it is precisely in that unstable space that artist and audience meet by means of bodily empathy. Antosik-Parsons' essay is experiential, in that the author dwells on her own bodily and affective reactions to the live performance that was happening before her eyes. Different from its recorded traces in the form of photography or video, a live performance is always a lived experience, and hence a perfect vehicle to facilitate the circulation of affects and emotions among those present.

The Era of the Anthropocene has generated a lot of academic and political debates. This new phase we are entering, or have indeed already entered, places humans at the very centre of existence. However, American biologist E. O. Wilson prefers to call this new period the Eremocene, or "the Age

of Loneliness" (Wilson 2013). As has been contended elsewhere (González-Arias 2015, 119), the phrase, poetic as it may sound, intimates the radical solitude humans will be doomed to if we do not put an end to the continuous destruction of ecosystems and our negative interactions with the non-human world. The Age of Loneliness acknowledges the painful reality of a world where the sounds of birds and the richness of forest life will be silenced by human irresponsibility. If in the past artists and scholars looked at the natural world in a contemplative manner and marvelled at the sublime aspects of oceans and mountains, the nature writing of the present problematises the Anthropocene and is characterised by a deep sense of ecological grief. This special issue also echoes this pain at the loss and damage of flora and fauna. In her essay "Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective", Alina Mitek-Dziemba takes Judith Butler's theories of human vulnerability and suffering and applies them to animal bodily existence. By confronting human and non-human vulnerability, the author seeks to acknowledge a cross-species community of affects. Mitek-Dziemba pays special attention to death and rituals of mourning, traditionally used to remark human exceptionality. Animals are now recognised in their grievable dimension and their deaths endowed with the dignity and recognition canonically reserved for humans. This acknowledgement is not to be underestimated in its socio-political possibilities since, as the author maintains, it invites activist responses on the part of the community.

In her turn, Justyna Stępień's piece, entitled "Affective Entanglements of Posthuman Bodies in Pain in Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9*" examines Barney's experimental film to bring into focus the interactions, interconnections and existential entanglements of the human, the non-human and the technological, so as to produce a mode of existence characterised by fluid multiplicities. Far from locating the human at the centre of the Anthropocene era, Stępień's essay is reminiscent of the old saying that we contain multitudes. As Donna Haraway highlighted in *When Species Meet*, our bodies are formed by numerous microorganisms that are constantly interacting, so that to be one necessarily means to be many (2008, 4). Stępień relies on Deleuze and Guattari to assess the ways in which Barney's experimental work reveals the interconnections and intra-connections of different materialities to produce new possibilities of embodiment. As these two essays show, humans are not alone on the planet, nor can we be deluded into considering ourselves exceptional. Our pain is essentially dialogical, multilayered, and crosses the species divide.

In her essay "Torture and Objectification of Pain in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*", Dilek Menteşe Kıryaman focuses on the living conditions of nineteenth-century factory workers to denounce the social inequalities and enforced bodily resilience as portrayed in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel. Although this is the only piece in the special issue devoted to the past, its analysis and conclusions are still relevant in our contemporary world, characterised as it is by deeply-rooted hierarchies of value based on the categories of gender, social status, race, or ethnicity. The author compares the physical suffering of the working class in the industrial society of Victorian England with forms of torture. As Menteşe Kıryaman notes, "torture is defined as an act of physical torment with the aim of forcing the tortured person to act in a certain way or to give specific information". Her essay does not, though, "generalise about the concept of torture by applying it to the working class" but rather uses the term metaphorically to denounce power-relations. The ethical difficulties of such a metaphor are bypassed eloquently in an essay that moves the reader to empathy and identification with the physical and emotional pain of the exploited workers of nineteenth-century England.

This special issue also includes a personal essay. There has been an exponential rise in interest in this genre in recent years, particularly when it comes to reflecting on the issues of pain, illness and care. If the academic essay emphasises the work of previous thinkers, writers and scientist in the building up of new knowledge, in the personal essay the subjective and distinctive voice of the author's "I" is paramount, leaving references and sources aside or reduced to a minimum. The personal essay is frequently (but not exclusively) written by a writer, artist or scholar who is also a patient, and hence privileges the point of view of the sufferer over that of the scientific, medical establishment. *Constellations: Reflections from Life*, by Sinéad Gleeson (2019), *Notes to Self: Essays*, by Emilie Pine (2018), and *I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death* (2017), by Maggie O'Farrell are among the recent examples of successful compilations of personal essays by fiction writers and scholars who have decided to move from the purely creative or the strictly academic to let their individual self conquer the page to deal with illness, disability, death, blood and bones.

"Riding the Sea Word" is Isabel Alonso-Breto's personal essay on her experience of breast cancer, from the moment of diagnosis to the present, when she can consider herself a survivor. Her piece is honest and blunt, unsentimental in tone but not devoid of dramatic tension. Alonso-Breto invites us into the familial, psychological and social dimensions of cancer. She

touches upon common scenarios related to illness and hospital appointments: dissociation of body and self in traumatic situations ("Sometimes I felt that my body was foreign, a distant thing, like somebody outside of myself"), coping with the shock of bad news, telling friends and family about the diagnosis, grieving the loss of a body part, fear. The essay does not avoid the word "cancer" but its title refers to this pathology by means of the fluid metaphor of the sea and its potential for healing. Alonso-Breto's essay also functions as a guide to successfully communicate with those going through the experience of cancer and, in that sense, it is reminiscent of Julia Darling's celebrated poem "How to Behave with the Ill", where the British poet advises: "Don't say, 'I heard that you were very ill'. / This makes the poorly paranoid. / Be direct, say 'How's your cancer?' / Try not to say how well we look / compared to when we met in Safeways" (Robinson 2015, 63). Darling's final lines ask for a collective awareness, even celebration, of life, which is also in part the effect that personal essays on illness have on the reader: "Remember that it is a miracle that any of us / stands up, breathes, behaves at all" (Ibid.).

This special issue on the affective aesthetics of the body in pain is organised in five distinct sections that correspond to the themes and theories indicated above: one on literary representations, one on performance and the visual arts, one on non-human affects and, finally, the confessional essay and the poems. However, readers will notice significant overlap between sections as ultimately all of these pieces dwell on the witnessing of pain, on the affective exchanges it triggers, and on the possibilities of art to cure or, at least, to contribute to the healing.

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