Nescio, sed sentio et excrucior: the many faces of art and pain (1)

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Dissatisfaction with the world is the source of all inspiration, be it in the theater or the fine arts or literature. If you are pleased with the world as it is, you don’t need to create anything, you can lean back and rest (Heiner Müller in Weber, 2001: 226-227, quoted by Varney) (2)

Poetry is my pain & my cure (Myron Lysenko)

When Ann McCulloch, Ron Goodrich and I decided that the theme of the fifth Double Dialogues Conference was to be ‘Art and Pain’, I somewhat cynically remarked, "Oh good, that will bring them out" -- the ‘them’ in question being academics, artists and those who are both. My instinct was, not so much that many of us are closet melancholics (well, perhaps…), but that there was so much fertile ground to explore in this connection. The conference and this issue of the Double Dialogues Journal bears out my intuition, and it is my pleasure (and pain) to draw together a number of themes that are explored with such insight in this volume.

In our Conference Brief we suggested that art is in some way a remodelling of lived experience into artificially constructed aesthetic forms (whether one sees art as representation, significant form, the expression of emotion, as institutionally defined and so on). Few people (and we are no exception) are nowadays brave (or foolish) enough to suggest a single definition for the word ‘art’, but we all know it is vitally important to who we are as human beings. We also feel, without always understanding how, that art has a strong connection to pain in human life, whether manifested as dysfunction, dislocation, tissue damage, political upheaval, community outrage, grief, depression and so forth. It is this connection between pain and art that we set out to explore in the conference and this volume.

An article in Melbourne’s daily broadsheet, the Age, on January 29, 2003 (Morgan, 2003) reported comments by the editor of the British Medical Journal, Richard Smith, to the effect that
"more and more of life's processes and difficulties - birth, death, sexuality, ageing, unhappiness, tiredness, loneliness, perceived imperfections in our bodies - are being medicalised ...Art can teach people something useful about their pain, he said, and advocated diverting some of Britain's health care budget to the arts".

Arts practitioners would surely agree, but we asked contributors to address more deeply and widely questions that claims such as these generate: just how does art interact with and respond to pain, how does pain respond to art, how does art cause pain, how and what does art teach people about their pain, and does art express pain for those who do not have the words to do it themselves? If art is in some way a remodelling of lived experience, is pain the most prevalent stimulus to that remodelling? While none of us would claim to have found the definitive answer to these questions (if such a thing exists or is philosophically possible), the papers found here cover a range of issues that gravitate around this central concern regarding the connection between art and pain.

**Life, pain, art and the sublime**

"Pain and suffering begin with existence and end when it ends, and this end gives pain and suffering to those who survive." — Jean-Luc Nancy

Clemens begins his essay with this quote from Jean-Luc Nancy to the effect that life and pain are coeval, an insight that mythologies around the world have tried to account for in their different ways. Artists too have of course contributed memorably to this perception: I think of Vergil's "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" (Aeneid 1.462) translated variously, but with the sense that 'these are the tears of things, and our mortality moves the soul'; and Aeschylus’ famous lines from the *Agamemnon* (176-83): we learn through suffering; pain drips in the heart, and "there is a grace that comes by violence from the gods". The Dionysian insight (Nietzsche, 1992, 22) that it were better 'not to have been born' was a staple of Greek thought and tragedy.

If human life and pain are inseparable, then it is no surprise that human art and pain are so interwoven. Something productive needs to be done with pain, and one of the most productive things to do with pain is to make art from it. The Dionysian insight, as McCulloch points out, needs Apollonian form to make it bearable. Clemens asserts the necessary connection between pain, aesthetics and art, "because of modern art's integral link to aesthetics" (a focus of targeted thought that particularly developed during the Enlightenment), in which "the pleasures and pains of a person’s particular body are bound up with a problem of a universal thought that is neither moral nor cognitive" (as aesthetic judgements are counted - to some extent - as distinct from moral and cognitive judgements). Aesthetic judgements are, he asserts, "ultimately founded in nothing other than pleasure and pain".

Mehigan makes the point that the new focus on art and pain during the Enlightenment came under the heading of 'the sublime', which he defines as "the creation of elevated feeling through an awareness of that which escapes [subjectivity]". Mehigan examines Kant’s notion that the sublime is linked to the possibility of subjective consciousness, especially after his ‘Copernican Revolution’
(in which he denied the human capacity to know things 'in themselves', outside of the mind's inherent organising structures -Tarnas, 1991, 341-51), and his Critique of Judgement in 1790. By referring to the word’s Latin derivations - *sublimare*, meaning to elevate, and *sub* (below) *limen* (threshold) – Mehigan suggests that the sublime "has come to signify both endless transcendence as well as the invocation to stay within outer limits above which consciousness loses the capacity to represent infinite ideas". An experience of the sublime, in particular the experience of formlessness outside of human awareness, simultaneously heightens and decentres the individual, pushing him/her back in their place, so to speak. "Pain arises as an issue for modern subjectivity", argues Mehigan, "because it is an essential aspect of the sublime". The sublime might be seen as the basis of modern subjectivity "because it suggests the limit to human understanding (of the objective world) that the emerging subject is called upon to observe and stay below".

McCulloch’s paper also deals, in part, with this notion of the de-centred subjectivity of the modern human, one that bears the legacy not only of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Freud, not to mention Locke, Hume, Kant and Nietzsche, but also in more recent times of the telescope and quantum mechanics.

Freud’s sublime, argues Mehigan, is pain sublimated: "sublimated forms of desire, displaced onto deeper levels of consciousness, internalise the very moment of violence that constitutes the operative power of sublime images". Sublimation (of physical desire) became, for Freud, "the centrepiece of human attempts to forge civilisation". Relief from pain became central to his thinking (much as it had done for the ancient Epicureans). Indeed, pain relief (through distraction, substitute satisfactions and drugs) is seen to be "a central part of the dialogue about the principal of subjectivity on which our version of modernity is established". Mehigan then considers the growth in the use of anaesthetics, which he suggests is coeval with the emergence of modernity through the nineteenth century, and their use by especially Romantic poets as a means of unlocking more directly the inner world of their imaginations. Anaesthetics and medical science have advanced together, and Mehigan concludes by asking "what are the plunging ravines and towering mountains of the sublime next to the sublime moment of going under the knife and waking up again on the other side--with consciousness intact and absolutely no memory of the moment when the scalpel was inserted?"

Clemens picks up the theme of pain relief and anaesthetics in his paper, "On Depression Considered as Acephalic Melancholia", linking it back to those Epicurean notions of *ataraxia* and *apatheia* (tranquillity due to the absence of pain), and the ancient philosopher’s desire for detachment from the material things of this world. Clemens goes on to explore contemporary depression and melancholy, which Zizek (2000: 660) describes as "disappointment at all positive, observable objects, none of which can satisfy our desire". Melancholy, which sits in the indeterminate space "between already-over and not-yet" (Clemens’ phrase is reminiscent of Heidegger’s discussion of truth and un-truth, and Zizek’s definition of the subject), and being both detached from and immured in the things of this world, seems peculiarly suited to philosophic treatment. Indeed Zizek claims that melancholy "effectively is the beginning of philosophy" (2000: 660). Clemens goes on to explore how contemporary scientific diagnoses of depression – "melancholy’s contemporary avatar" – with their (economically motivated?) predilection for drug treatments, have lead to the exclusion of these "unexpected bonds between matter, aesthetics and philosophy" and the "symbolic efficacy" of language. The title of
Clemens’ paper (‘acephalic’ means ‘without a head’) is explained here when he writes:

"Depression," we might say, is what happens to melancholy when the sufferer’s words are considered absolutely meaningless or, at best, mere reports of affect. Depression is a literally mindless melancholy, an acephalic melancholy.

Clemens asks that we find an imaginative solution to depression, not just a chemical one.

The notions of sublimation and the decentred and conflicted subject is developed in an interesting way by Rawlings, who examines the way that damage done to the environment causes 'community outrage', defined as "the product of increasing community concern for the environment and a decreasing level of trust in public institutions, especially in terms of protecting the environment". The community disturbance has been caused, writes Rawlings, by "antiquated Enlightenment concepts of the environment...a distanced contemplation of the environment as artifactual rather than natural". Modern subjectivity, faced with the incomprehensibility of much of contemporary technology and science, with the unfathomable immensity of the universe after the discovery and refinement of the telescope, and, we might add, with the all-pervasive power of 'Empire', has become conflicted. The techno-somatic subject is conflicted by, on the one hand, its thirst for environmentally unsustainable behaviour and on the other by a social conscience. 'Community outrage' sees a global economy as unrepresentative of its ideals even though it strives for the same unsustainable growth that the techno-somatic subject holds dear.

The words to say it - hypersensitivity and its expression

It is one of the fascinating aspects of the connection between art and pain that what many have seen as the acute receptivity of the artist to certain aspects of the world around him or her (or as Dessaix describes it, "looking around you at the world as if it were constantly, dangerously, mystifyingly new" - 1998: 424), approximates the heightened sensitivity to the external world generated by at least some forms of pain, especially (but not only) depression. In McCulloch’s essay, ‘K’ writes about her own experience of depression to another sufferer, noting the depressive’s acute hypersensitivity to his/her surroundings. At the same time, says ‘K’, "With your interior so exposed and your form obliterated, things take on a new experience". Thus for the depressive, the exterior world has an increased power to wound, while the inner world is more vulnerable to wounding. Robert Dessaix (1998) describes the creative moment as an ‘erotic crossing’ between what is ‘out there’ in the exterior world, and something that is alive ‘in here’ in the artist's inner world. Thus the two terms of Dessaix's 'erotic crossing' are activated by pain, suggesting that the experience of pain is particularly generative of creativity.

It is commonly thought that the worldview of someone in pain is distorted – ‘think positively, things will improve, you'll see’. But Clemens explores the "link between apparent truth-telling about self and depression", making the interesting point that, given the apposition of life and pain, what Aaron Beck calls the 'negative cognitive
shift’ in depressives should rather be called the ‘accurate cognitive shift’; various laboratory tests have suggested that people who are depressed are less self-deluded than ‘normal’ people. He includes Freud’s comment on the same phenomenon: “we only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind” (Freud, 1991: 255). Clemens therefore asks us to listen more carefully to “the content of the depressive’s utterances”. McCulloch similarly writes of “a knowledge known to depressives” and asks, “What, therefore, are we not learning by sidelining or rejecting these insights?” I am reminded of a telling comment by the 1998 Nobel Prize winning novelist José Saramago:

But if there is a way for the world to be transformed for the better, it can only be done by pessimism; optimists will never change the world for the better (in Langer, 2002)

Those in pain do not always have the words to express it, as numerus contributors point out. Varney quotes Elaine Scary on this:

"Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain, but who speak on behalf of those who are (1985: 6)"

Indeed some forms of pain are considered ineffable, at least through direct means or scientific language. McCulloch addresses this issue, asking, "Is terrible desolation and woe without expression or is it not the case that literature, art, dance, music and theatre have given us the words and apprehensions of its meaning?" She proposes that Sartre’s Nausea is a case in point; her reading of the work "tests the extent to which the expression of nausea is in fact an expression of what depressives know when in anguish". Her paper combines a case study in depression with this reading of Nausea, concluding with some telling responses by the subject of the case study to Sartre’s classic existentialist novel. Importantly, it is the obliqueness of the artistic remodelling of lived experience, the art work’s "concealing abstractions" as McCulloch puts it, or Mehigan’s ‘suggestion through analogy’ in the face of "a terror-inducing encounter" with Nature, that allows such knowledge and pain to be revealed. Dessaix remarks that the ‘erotic crossing’ between ‘out there’ and ‘in here’ does not result in a creative moment by itself: "A metaphor has to arise from the crossing in order for a creation to occur" (1998: 416). Bradford similarly notes that the effectiveness of the politicised children’s picture books that she examines, which retell narratives of traumatic experiences and episodes in the histories of a number of postcolonial nations, relies on the way they build a sense of pain "through metaphor rather than through representational images".

The use of metaphor and other oblique strategies to express pain may suggest what many have argued: one must detach oneself from painful experience before either resolution or creativity can occur. As Ritchie points out, "Dominant twentieth century medical and clinical models have assumed that grief will be ‘resolved’ when survivors reach the point where they can emotionally detach themselves from the dead person". But the ‘creative moment’, as Dessaix describes it, surely relies, as Ritchie suggests, on an interim space involving ‘continuity’. The ‘erotic crossing’ will not occur if one of the pathways to that moment has been set aside. Dessaix describes the moment as "primarily an event, it's something that happens - something I can put myself in the way of" (1998: 416). Ritchie suggests that rather
than ‘detaching’ from loss and grief, or ‘getting on with it’, as dominant medical and psychological paradigms suggest, or, on the other hand, following the example set by the Romantic melancholic and refusing to let go of grief, it is by remaining in this interim space of continuity that the creative remodelling of painful experience is possible. Lysenko comments that most of his work “comes from some sort of conscious or subconscious pain. Some of this pain from my past has been resolved but some of it has not, so writing poetry about it is a way of trying to explore it further”. With characteristically touching humour, he says he once took one of his poems to his therapist, and was told, "you need to take more responsibility for your pain"- whereupon he was able to finish re-writing the poem. This same poignant humour is found in one of Paterson’s poems called “Strange Soil”, in which, in the course of evoking the scattering of his father’s ashes, he writes

It’s windy.
Some of Pop
has fallen on my shoe
and another bit
is floating in Aunty Kathy’s champagne.

Art and healing

The healing power of art has been proclaimed loud and wide in recent years, so much so that, as O’Brien observes, with a note of gentle rebuke, "it would seem that the arts are the panacea for all pain". Indeed from Aristotle to Artaud (despite, and in fact by means of, his injunction that theatre should affect the audience like a plague), the homeopathic effect of the arts has been asserted. The current prevalence of ‘arts for health and well-being’ programs in Australia, and in the western world generally, would suggest, notes O’Brien, "that the catharsis experienced through seeing or reading about pain as imagined by artists, can also be experienced when art is applied, as it were, to real life pain experienced by ordinary people”. Her own research project, called Risky Business, is examining the efficacy of ‘arts intervention programs’ to assuage real-life pain amongst young people ‘at risk’ of self-destructive behaviours. Although critical of the art-for-health agenda, and the potential for political naivety in these programs (see below), her project description "argues for the exploration of creative (rather than corrective) diversionary programs". Ritchie argues, "the construction of biographical narratives of all kinds is a fundamental mechanism for restoring a sense of meaning and place for the dead and lost in the ongoing trajectory of self-narrative". Implicit in Ritchie’s argument is the possibility of what McCulloch describes as ‘the production of a subjectivity’, a concept that is explicitly post-Kant. Bereavement is described here not so much (or at least not only) as the loss of ‘other’, but as the loss of (part of) the self. In the search for ontological security, the sufferer of grief may find that "while pain is not a necessary precursor of creative expression, creative expression is certainly a necessary and useful part of dealing with pain".

The healing ability of art to name (‘that which must be named’, as McCulloch suggests), and to provide a form and an expression to pain, is argued by Barrett, who connects body and mind, creativity and healing, and argues that “aesthetic experience (both the production and the reception of art) results in reparation and healing”. Art, she suggests, "has long been recognised as serving a crucial role in
assuaging loss and facilitating emotional reconciliation”. She pursues this theme through her examination of therapies “which focus on bodily and sensory awareness as integral mechanisms of reparation”. She cites Levi-Strauss’ work with shamans and childbirth, and asserts that the reorganisation of painful experience into an aesthetic form (narrative, myth, dance etc) can lead to a release of symptoms. Moreover Barrett suggests, with Kristeva, that language has a sensory as well as a semantic dimension, and that “bodily processes are continuous with, rather than separated from, signification”. The ability to express emotional states through symbolic means therefore has a physiological as well as psychological effect: “words, images and signs strike the body like objects, and have the capacity to intensify or assuage both physical pain and grief” (I quote here from Barrett’s conference abstract). Barrett then discusses Gerda Alexander’s work on ‘tonus’ (“the system by which one feels and reacts … the capacity for fibre muscles to change in response to effort required for various levels of [physical and emotional] action”) and ‘eutony’ (a state of receptiveness, requiring “a sense of ‘presence’ or neutral attitude that permits observations to occur which are not affected by mediated or prior expectations of results). The state of ‘eutony’ “produces a state of unity and integrity that liberates creative forces”. The inclusion of the arts in psychotherapy is a way, Barrett suggests, to overcome the mind/body split of conventional psychotherapeutic practices, and the denigration of the body generally in one stream of Western thought. The work of New York therapist Jeanne Achterberg with visualisation or imaging processes to treat cancer and other patients is offered as a striking challenge to those who would dismiss the physiological benefits of the imagination.

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