

Sublime sufferings

Linguistic pain and the problem of representation

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Abstract

Critical engagements with the representability of pain have often insisted on an unbridgeable binary between the phenomenon of pain and the medium of language. Elaine Scarry, for one, famously argues that pain effectively destroys language in that it undoes language's referential function. This article decidedly departs from a representationalist understanding of pain in order to pursue a type of pain irreducible to the lived experience of a given subject – a pain that occurs precisely through the breakdown of representation, the nature of which is entirely determined by language. The traits of this new kind of 'linguistic pain' are developed through careful readings of texts by Franz Kafka, Georg Trakl, Martin Heidegger, and Paul de Man.

Keywords: Paul de Man, Martin Heidegger, Franz Kafka, Georg Trakl, linguistic pain, representation, sublime

It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were
endowed with language

Walter Benjamin

A single voice raises the clamor of being

Gilles Deleuze

Pain pangs at the core of the problem of reference. This proposition may serve as the guiding hypothesis of the article at hand, written in response to a central issue that determines the representation of pain in literature. Another way of formulating this guiding thesis would be to hold not merely that pain constitutes one among many conceivable problems for representation, but that it is possible to demonstrate that the problem of pain fundamentally conditions the sheer possibility of representation, so much so that every time one asks about the possibility of representing this or that, one implicitly touches upon the problem of pain. This is the case because the occurrence of pain is fundamental to the establishment of reference; whenever one seeks to constitute a referent through language, a certain painful force is at play, a suffering takes place. Instead of simply addressing the 'representation of pain', the following pages therefore focus on the 'pain of representation' itself: a pain *prior* to the establishment of any psychologizable subjectivity in whose frame of reference one could locate the desire to represent in language a certain felt pain. The pains of reference, to say it *in nuce*, essentially precede any representation of pain.

In order to unfold this hypothesis, I proceed by unpacking and discussing a series of literary and theoretical considerations of the problem, starting with a critique of representationalist takes on pain that have come to occupy a powerful and influential perspective in contemporary literary studies. Through a discussion of texts by Judith Butler, Ilit Ferber, Paul de Man, and Werner Hamacher, my argument will then establish a counterparadigm that allows us to detach pain from the preponderance of phenomenal representation, making it legible as an emphatically *philological* occurrence; that is, a moment pertaining to the structure of language itself that needs to be in place for something like the representation of pain to become possible. This newly disclosed philology of pain is then further unfolded through an encounter with the German-speaking modernist writers Franz Kafka and Georg Trakl. If this roundabout argumentative tactic eventually amounts to a single identifiable goal, it is to depose the experiencing subject as the sole possible location for the occurrence of pain, a paradigm that has misleadingly governed the literary discourse on pain for too long.

Denunciations of language

A powerful notion in the cultural discourse on pain locates in it a kind of anti-linguistic thrust: pain is said to motivate a type of aphasia, the pain-induced inability to speak and express oneself. Encumbered by the experience of pain,

the feeling subject becomes mute; the experience itself retreats into a crevasse of unshareability. If language is a means of binding a multiplicity of subjects in 'communication', pain appears to sever the links established by speech, understanding, and shared discourse. In pain one is alone, withdrawn from the kind of sociality guaranteed through expression, address, and response. A pained state blankets its subject with mute solitude. The discourse on pain is thus haunted by its own unspeakability. How to discuss the very thing that retreats from representation in language? How to derive an abstract concept from the concrete pangs felt in unshareable ways by a sensible body?

Perhaps the most influential intervention made in the critical discourse on pain in the course of the past half-century, Elaine Scarry's oft-quoted *The Body in Pain*, establishes a sheer antagonism between pain and its linguistic presentation. Such an antagonistic disposition does not simply separate 'real events' from language, but implies that painful experiences harbour the capacity of *annihilating* language, demolishing the prospect of any kind of translatability between what is *felt* and what is *spoken*. Pain, according to Scarry, is not only to be conceived of as remote from language but as openly destructive of our very capacity to put into words, express, and articulate.

The passage most often referred to in discussions and critiques of Scarry's work claims that 'physical pain' not only 'resists language but actively destroys it', thereby opening up 'a state anterior to language [...] the sounds and cries a human being makes before a language is learned' (Scarry 1985: 4). The concept of language at stake in this claim is ostensibly rather simplistic: Scarry seems to thematize the withdrawal of a kind of language that can objectively be assumed to be intelligible, communicable, and well structured according to commonly learned and understood rules of grammar and the necessities of logic. A cry would therefore not be considered language, nor, one could speculate, would a whimper, a howl, a chirp, and so on.¹ The argument thus establishes an anthropocentric paradigm that focuses exclusively on language to the extent that it is 'human' and thus intelligible; moreover, it temporalizes this human language into a posterior state that would form 'language proper' as opposed to the anterior state of a newborn's clamour.

The question, however, persists as to whether language is indeed reducible to its formed and coherent state, acquirable through linguistic education, governed by transcribable rules that ensure the maximum level of intelligibility. Or is it possible to widen the scope of the concept of language such that the state to which Scarry ascribes the attribute 'anterior' would in fact be part of language's complexity? So that pain, rather than manifesting a moment exclusive to and

destructive of language, would itself instantiate a purely philological principle that permits tapping into that dimension of language where the formation of something like linguistic coherence has yet to take place. If pain is still to be considered destructive, its negativity does not affect language as such, but only language insofar as it is structured and formed. Understood this way, it is possible to discern in pain a path to understanding the very principles of language formation, including the ways in which linguistic structures become constituted and deconstituted, formed and unformed, precisely in the quasi-utterances or not-yet-utterances, the no-longer-intelligible articulations and dearticulations of pained clamour. Contrary to Scarry's suggestion, then, the pained outcry *opens up* language like a correctly formulated, logically consistent proposition never could.

Discussing what she calls 'the structure of torture', Scarry corroborates her claim in the following way:

It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject. (Scarry 1985: 35)

This passage establishes a link between a wide range of concepts, including 'self', 'subject', 'world', 'experience', and 'language'. While their connection might suggest a certain level of elaborate complexity, the understanding of language at stake here is even more flattened than the one suggested by the initially quoted passage. Here, language is introduced exclusively as a receptacle of 'content', so that linguistic structures become entirely negligible as they merely serve the preservation and presentation of their utterances' contents. As the creator and controller of this content, Scarry posits a 'self' who, unpained, is able to act as the 'source and subject' of its linguistic output. Language is therefore understood as being constituted through its subject's abilities – and once these abilities withdraw, as observed in a state of pain, language inevitably corrodes. Language ceases to be a function of its debilitated subject. According to this view, all language is but an attribute of the self, a mere instrument that would be useless once it could no longer be filled with the contents that would 'express and project the self'. The subject appears as language's sole ground, and lived experience appears as its only possible content.

If we attempt a reconciliation of this passage with Scarry's earlier suggestion that language can be acquired by the subject through learning, the problem arises as to how the subject could learn a language if language apparently has no 'integrated' existence outside the subject. If language is merely a subjective property, and if it is only 'integrated' insofar as it is filled with experiential content, then how could there ever be an 'anterior state' prior to language acquisition whence the subject could learn how to talk and express and syntactically align words and phrases? It might very well be the case that pain robs language of any given subjective 'content', but why should that imply the destruction of language as such? It is equally curious that Scarry does not distinguish between different modes of expression, as a latent emphasis seems to lie on verblivity and speech as opposed to other, less logocentrically anchored, linguistic regimes. For could one not imagine a scenario in which a felt pain is so strong that the ability to speak is impaired, yet one would still be able, say, to write or read? Reducing our linguistic comport toward pain to verbal expression serves a representationalist paradigm according to which all language is lost if we fail to translate what is felt into intelligible speech. Bodily symptoms, conversion disorder, unintelligible outcries, shrieks, pained forms of reading, silent written expression, body language – all these seemingly marginal acts and para-phenomena of linguistic being are excluded from the outset.

In order to avoid the overt subjectivist representationalism at work in Scarry's argument, one could invert her guiding assumption such that the subject appears as a function of language instead of it being the other way around. Language would provide the field in which the subject could constitute and, to use Scarry's term, 'project' itself, a field in which it could furnish given structures, acquired through learning, with specific experiential contents. To be sure, an intense bout of pain or prolonged period of suffering may strip the subject of the ability to make use of these structures and their projected contents – but the field of language, as the sheer potentiality of expressing formed content, remains unaffected. Rather than collapsing into annihilation through a massive onslaught of pain, language opens the space in which pain can destroy the subject. This reversal allows us to understand even the loss of linguistic properties, the inability to express and represent a given content, as philological processes – that is, as movements that are still, if negatively, determined by language.² While it may render the *instrumental* function of language inaccessible to the subject, the loss of speech does not make it venture *outside* language: this loss takes place as philological occurrence, a kind of silence and incapacitation that merely reveals yet another facet of language's complex givenness.

There is a brief but noteworthy critique of Scarry's work in the opening section of Judith Butler's 1997 study *Excitable Speech* where the author holds that that Scarry 'makes the point that the threat of violence is a threat to language' and she therefore 'tends to set violence and language in opposition' (6; emphasis original). The questions Butler then adds indicate the direction her own book will take, hence her departure from Scarry's endeavour: 'What if language has within it its own possibilities for violence and world-shattering? [...] how do we account for the specific kind of injury that language itself performs?' (6). It is critical to point out that what Butler locates in language is not the experience of pain but the ability to inflict it: violence. Covertly shifting Scarry's terminology, Butler replaces pain with violence when attacking the binaries that encumber Scarry's argument, a switch that arguably undoes part of Butler's own argument as the connection between pain and violence remains undertheorized. In the pages Butler quotes, however, Scarry does not use the term 'violence'; it is not violence that actively annihilates language, but pain. Rephrasing Butler's question in Scarry's terms would therefore mean asking whether language has within it its own possibilities for the experience of pain. This leads me to posing the guiding question of this article: how do we account for the specific kind of pain that solely takes place in language?

Perhaps the reason why Butler does not, or cannot, ask this question is that, while ostensibly departing from Scarry, she still upholds a somewhat subjectivist understanding of language – that is, one that primarily assumes language to be an instrument deployed by a subject in the commission of certain acts. Some of these acts imply injurious speech such that language's violent potential is mobilized to inflict pain upon a given addressee. Yet Butler demonstrates how this address, thus the uses and abuses of language, plays a constitutive role in the formation of the subject (2). This is to say that language partakes, through invective, interpellation, and address, in the constitution of the very subject upon whom it is deployed to call. This also includes the subject's body – the very site wherein Scarry locates the experience of pain. A complicated co-imbrication occurs between the subject and its linguistic properties, which implies that the subject's relationship with language is never one of 'mastery or control', but one of 'mostly agency' (a syntagm Butler [8] borrows from Morrison).

In that she situates the structure of subjectivity, at least in part, within the realm of language, Butler is able to discern the emphatically philological dimension of the type of pain inflicted by injurious speech for which she explicitly reserves the notion of 'linguistic pain' (5). While this term is unfortunately abandoned as soon as it is pronounced, it insinuates a true departure from

Scarry as it finally grasps pain as a linguistic occurrence instead of something that takes place in an experiential reality situated exterior to language. Thus it also destroys the illusion of a subject whose constitution would not be owed to language but who would deploy language as a secondary faculty, a mere tool of subjective comportment that must always fall short of adequately expressing an experience of pain. Rather than severing the body from its linguistic dimension or threatening to destroy language, this type of pain manifests as a genuine function *of* language. It remains the case, however, that Butler is less interested in the philological quality of its occurrence than in the subjective suffering induced by this newly discovered kind of ‘linguistic pain’. Otherwise put, this kind of pain remains subject to lived experience, and is registered in a living consciousness capable of language, able to receive and render intelligible an injurious linguistic blast.

The lesson of the sublime

For the remainder of this article, I wish to explore the particular qualities of the ‘linguistic pain’ that Butler gives such short shrift as she leaves the term largely undefined. It points toward the possibility of a kind of pain that occurs solely as a matter of language, uncoupled from any prestabilized subject and its lived experience. Rather than a physiological event or a psychologizable episode, this kind of pain would become manifest as a *philological* event. That is, as an occurrence *of* language and *in* language – albeit not in the sense of language as an instrument or tool, or the site of subjective agency, but as the sheer ground of possibility for the formation of linguistic structures and forms of presentation.

In the wake of Butler’s intervention, recent scholarship has attempted to throw the concept of ‘linguistic pain’ into sharper relief. Of particular note is a newly published book by the Israeli philosopher Ilit Ferber that connects the question of pain to language’s origin through extensive readings of Herder and Sophocles. Herder’s 1772 *Treatise on the Origin of Language* famously locates the pained outcry at the onset of linguistic being, thus marking a crass distinction to Scarry’s suggestions and their aftermath. While Ferber does not deny that the experience of pain can render language defective, she nonetheless insists on the emphatically linguistic dimension of this undoing. Consider the following statement: ‘When pain encounters language, it tears it apart, and in doing so its very essence is laid bare’ (Ferber 2019: 3). This proposition allows for at least two readings, depending on how one decides to understand the possessive pronoun ‘its’. On the one hand, the pronoun might be read as referring to

'pain', which would mean that only pain's ability to undo language shows us, in the ultimate analysis, the truth about pain. On the other hand, however, the pronoun might be read as referring to 'language'. This would mean that, rather than diagnosing a simple antagonism between pain and language, we are called upon to understand the negativity with which the former affects the latter as a laying bare of the very essence of language. It is in pain, then, that the nature of language discloses itself.

Importantly, Ferber's specific engagement with Scarry hinges upon the problem of reference. Identifying pain's resistance to language, ensured by the sheer unshareability of its experience, as the 'cornerstone' of Scarry's theory, Ferber proceeds to analyse this claim as the result of the collapse of reference: 'Pain [...] may have an objective reason [...] but this does not mean that the experience of pain itself has a referential structure [...] since it has no object (i.e., it is not about or for something) pain has no objective, public presence' (9). When Scarry argues that pain is actively destructive of language, what is primarily at stake, it seems, is language's referential function. That may also be the reason why she can identify language with its thematic 'content'; if we think about linguistic structures as reducible to their referential function, their expressed content coincides with the representation of a given referent. In a state of pain, however, this objectification in language becomes impossible, for the only referent one could deliver or reproduce would be the source of pain, be it an illness, an accidental event, perhaps a wound, or the agent behind what Butler calls 'violence', while the aching pain itself recedes from any referential objectification. This obliteration of reference is an undisputed loss, yet what concerns me here is precisely the question whether this loss coincides with the loss of language itself. If Ferber is right in her critique of representationalist approaches to the relationship between language and pain, then the cessation of reference, rather than marking a point of termination and closure, proffers an opening through which the 'essential' dimension of language becomes accessible. As for referentiality and what remains of it, a formulation by German philosopher Werner Hamacher (1989: 185) sums it up quite poignantly: 'In this relation to its possible not-being, the referential function of language, emptied of all thematic content, steps forth as a barren formal constraint'.

Hamacher's remark is made in the context of an engagement with Paul de Man, whose reading practice, especially in his later work, indicates an increasing suspicion of language's referential constraints. De Man considered the referential function of language a 'trap', albeit an 'inevitable' one (see Warminski 1996: 1). There seems to be no question that the entire discourse around the relationship

between language and pain is prone to fall into this trap: loyal to the imperatives of an empirically anchored representationalism, theories of linguistic pain have fallen short of taking seriously precisely the 'linguistic' dimension of the issues they encounter. For de Man, a blind reliance on the referent, and the seductive belief that language can objectively represent the latter, are a matter of ideology, *aesthetic* ideology to be precise. He explains this term very concisely in a passage from *Resistance to Theory* where he justifies the necessity of what he calls a 'non-phenomenal linguistics' (1986: 11). By that he means an understanding of language that unmoors linguistic structures from their presumed ties to phenomenal reality, such that language can no longer be assumed to be a reliable source of information about phenomenal reality. Such an assumption, de Man maintains, would have to be called ideological. And he expounds, 'What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism' (11).

What's important for the context of the present discussion is that certain interventions in the literature on pain tend to totalize the referential function of language such that language is rendered useless precisely at that point where it fails properly to represent a phenomenal content. Such a stance, however, displays a murky and confused understanding of reference, reading it as a property of empirical entities that makes them representable in linguistic terms. De Man advocates for an inversion of this hierarchy in such a way that reference becomes conceivable as a function not of 'real' phenomena but of language itself; reducing language's referential function to a plain phenomenalism would mean calamitously to omit the complexity of linguistic structures. Statements formulated in language can certainly *indicate* something. The ideological fallacy at play with regard to reference, however, all too quickly assumes that this indication coincides with a certain intended empirical reality, as if language and phenomena were simply two aspects of the same ontology. Slightly adjusting what was observed above, it is therefore possible to argue that 'pain' is a prime instigator not so much of the sheer annihilation of language's referential function but of its dislodging, its unmooring – its severance from the phantasm of linguistic phenomenalism. What is destroyed in pain is not language per se, but the prevalent ideological suppositions regarding the way it operates.

It is not often that de Man explicitly discusses the problem of pain. One moment of critical importance, however, can be found in his discussion of materiality in Kant's aesthetics. In particular, de Man is interested in Kant's analytic of the sublime as he sets out to expose the immense problems the sublime poses for a possible understanding of the 'third critique' as the place of

a possible reconciliation between Kant's epistemology and his moral philosophy. The passages bearing upon our present discussion thematize what de Man identifies as the 'failure' of comprehension to articulate the sublime in terms of a finite totality. This failure is the direct result of a dialectical complication that permeates the sublime: while it knows no borders and limits, it paradoxically has to 'appear' as a delimited, totalized entity. It is a noumenal infinity that nonetheless seeks to be phenomenally represented.

The complexities structuring the sublime, then, disclose a strange similarity to the problem of pain that, as we observed, challenges the paradigm of representation in a similar fashion. The inherent connection between pain and the representation of the sublime drawn by de Man is sketched in a dense passage (1996: 76) that deserves to be quoted at length:

It is clear that what the sublime achieves [...] is the awareness of another faculty besides understanding and reason, namely, the imagination. Out of the pain of the failure to constitute the sublime by making the infinite apparent (*anschaulich*) is born the pleasure of the imagination, which discovers, in this very failure, the congruity of its law (which is the law of failure) with the law of our own suprasensory being. Its failure to connect with the sensory would also elevate it above it.

Instead of manifesting a representable phenomenon, the sublime thus marks a departure from the empirical and its representation. This failure to make the sublime apparent, and thereby phenomenally accessible, turns out to be but a function of a transcendental principle that allows for a transvaluation of this failure into an elevation above the empirical. The subject transgresses the realm of empirical representation through the discovery of its 'suprasensory being'. It is important to note that the 'pleasure' of this discovery, in de Man's reading, is secondary to the primacy of the pain resulting from the failure to represent. The question thus arises as to where this pain is located, since it obviously indicates the collapse of the sensory through the discovery of the suprasensory. The failure provoking this kind of pain is precisely the failure to establish a connection with the sensory. But if the sensory proffers the very dimension that permits the experience of pain, how are we to 'imagine' a kind of pain that lies beyond it, indeed a pain that arises right as the sensory founders?

It is hardly possible to overestimate the critical consequences implied by de Man's presentation of the sublime. In the context of my discussion of 'linguistic pain', it means that the sublime opens a path for thinking the occurrence of

pain as radically disconnected from the kind of phenomenality that governs large segments of the discourse on pain's representability. De Man aids an understanding of pain and the problems involved in 'making it apparent' that views the *presentation of pain* as contingent upon the aporia of a *pain of presentation*. To the extent that this kind of pain indicates a departure from the sensory, it cannot be 'felt' nor in any way be construed as deriving from events one could register through lived experience and empirical encounter.³ The pain at stake in de Man's discussion of the sublime is precisely the pain of no longer being able to feel pain, a painful because painless loss of the sensory, the impossible pang involved in mourning the forfeiture of pain itself. In the very moment when sensory experience withdraws into its own collapse, it leaves as its remainder an unexperiencable pain, the impalpable tremor of the unrepresentable.

Following de Man's construal of the sublime in Kant, the pain that arises from the failure of making the sublime objectively apparent furthermore yields a specific type of pleasure that is connected to the imagination. In the encounter with the unexperiencable, the faculty of the imagination relinquishes its empirical moment, forfeiting, to repeat de Man's important formulation, its connection to the 'sensory'. This sacrificial moment of a painless shock of severance from the empirical bears, however, the deep pleasure of the imagination which, freed from the sensory, can now ally itself with reason. This alliance, in Kant's original formulation (2000: 152), endows the imagination with an 'enlargement and power which is greater than that which it sacrifices'. The imagination thus occupies the place of a relay between the empirical and what de Man calls our 'suprasensory being', such that through the initial shock that induces the pain of failing 'to make' the sublime 'apparent' an excess of power is revealed and a surplus of magnitude gained that mark the departure from the empirical. Kant underscores this twofold gesture when he holds that while, on the one hand, the imagination is 'physically dependent', it also functions, in accordance with the principles of the power of judgement, as 'an instrument of reason and its ideas' and may thus 'assert our independence in the face of the influences of nature' and 'place what is absolutely great only in its (the subject's) own vocation' (152). Rather than confirming the power of nature, the sublime thus marks the secession from the empirical through the embrace of suprasensory intensity.

The problem now arises that the pain of failing to represent, even if we concede its departure from the empirical and thus its severance from any kind of potentially tempting phenomenality, still remains lodged in the subject: it operates as the unsensory pain of the subject's elevation to its suprasensory

being. In the pursuit of the concept of ‘linguistic pain’, it thus becomes necessary to discern the emphatically philological dimension of the sublime, one that would first of all make plausible its linguistic character, and, second, allow for its connection to the structure of literariness, narrative, fabulation. In his discussion of phenomenality and materiality in Kant, de Man approaches this problem directly by introducing the possibility of reading Kant’s analytic of the sublime not as situated within a philosophical system in which the faculties of the mind are at stake, but as indicating ‘a potentiality inherent in language’ (1996: 78). This means that the sublime can only be considered a problem of pure discourse, a formal principle that makes it possible for us to trace and discern the sublime as a linguistic operation, but one that dissolves the moment it is translated back into a philosophical system seeking to apply it to the mind: ‘The sublime cannot be grounded as a philosophical (transcendental or metaphysical) principle, but only as a linguistic principle’ (78). If this is the case, however, then the pain at the root of the imagination’s sacrifice and subsequent elevation has to be construed as a ‘formal’ or ‘linguistic pain’. As a matter of fact, this pain can *only* take place in discourse for, reapplied to the subject, it would miss the very possibility of being experienced and thus becoming pain ‘proper’.

Abundant fabrications

If we now seek to consider how literature relates to (and perhaps appropriates) the sublime, two questions are of critical significance: what happens to the ‘formal pain’ of representation’s collapse when operating in literature? And how does the excessive gain in ‘power’, which Kant connects to the departure from the sensory, manifest itself in literary language? Reading Kleist, for instance, Werner Hamacher discovers a moment of sheer literariness – we might want to call it the ‘literary function’ that can be derived from Kant’s analytic. He observes that any representation affected by the structure of the sublime has to take place under the pretense of the categorical reservation of an ‘as if’, as he traces this marker of hesitation and fictionalization throughout Kleist’s story ‘The earthquake in Chile’. According to Hamacher, Kleist’s ‘formulations concerning the indissociable ambiguity of losing and gaining, pleasure and displeasure, presentation and breach of presentation [with which the sublime confronts us] contain certain reservations: undecidability, possible illusion, “as if”’ (277–8). What appears to be a ‘reservation’ could, however, also reveal a moment of genuine literariness, such that Kleist’s ‘as if’, necessitated by the

structure of the sublime, would reflect precisely the regained excessive power of an imagination unmoored from the sensory.

Consider a different example: an entry from Kafka's diary, penned in September 1917. Here, Kafka speculates, albeit without reaching a satisfying conclusion, on the very aspect of pain that he considers excessively generative of fiction:

Have never understood how it is possible for almost everyone who writes to objectify his or her pain in the very midst of undergoing it [*im Schmerz seinen Schmerz zu objektivieren*]; thus I, for example, in the midst of my unhappiness, in all likelihood with my head still smarting from unhappiness, sit down and write to someone: I am unhappy. Yes, I can even go beyond that and with as many flourishes as I have the talent for, all of which seem to have nothing to do with my unhappiness, fantasize, simply or contrapuntally, or with whole orchestras of associations. And it is not a lie, and it does not quench my pain; it is simply a merciful surplus of strength [*gnadenweiser Überschuß der Kräfte*] at a moment when the pain has raked me to the bottom of my being and plainly exhausted all my strength. But what kind of surplus is it? (1976: 384; translation modified)

At first glance, the passage seems to run counter to what I have argued thus far: Kafka clearly grants the possibility of 'objectifying' pain through language. The example he gives is a situation of unhappiness that allows its subject to express its state of being in the very moment of affectation: 'I am unhappy'. Interestingly, however, Kafka moves the expressive paradigm away from the verbal, as it is not the pained outcry that allows the subject to express its discomfort, but a scene of writing: one can 'sit down and write to someone'. Yet this scene of writing is no end in itself, because the impulse to write coincides with an apostrophic urge. The manifestation of the pained state in writing thus happens less for the sake of the one in pain than for a nameless other, the intended *addressee*, who might dismiss the information or show up with empathy and care.

It soon becomes obvious, however, that Kafka's emphasis on 'objectification' is quite misleading, and perhaps purposefully so. For even if we grant the possibility of formulating, in writing, a truthful proposition regarding the experience of pain, this *Schreibszene* brings with it a critical *doubling* of pain that unmoors its phenomenal anchoring and constitutes it as a linguistic referent. Kafka makes this explicit when considering the objectification *of* pain *in* pain; the German original reads, 'im Schmerz seinen Schmerz zu objektivieren'.²⁴ This

formulation implies that, in writing, the *pain experienced* doubles into a *pain inscribed*, indicating a rift or split that fails 'objectively' to preserve the intended phenomenon through its translation into linguistic traces. The 'objectified' pain would thus have to be called 'another pain', one that comes on top, or in the wake, of the pain experienced, but that does not, and cannot, coincide with it. Tying this observation back to the discussion of the sublime in de Man, one could argue that the experience of pain always troubles the referential function of language with a certain doubling: the pain that seeks to be 'made apparent' doubles into the pain that arises from the failure of making apparent. Hence the structure of the referent is essentially split, folded against itself, and fragmented; for the imperative to represent pain, e.g. in language, automatically implies a catachrestic reference to the pain that emanates from the inability to represent. Every representation of pain is pained by the failure to represent. In this sense, every pain can be said to be sublime.

If Kafka's passage reveals the structure of 'linguistic pain' in a way that is akin to the formalism of the sublime, the subject's objectifying proposition on its state of pain would somehow have the potential to unlock or be keyed into an excessive overflow of the imagination, a boundless 'as if', to reiterate the *topos* Hamacher highlights in Kleist. As Kafka continues his deliberation, he observes that the writerly force behind the statement 'I am unhappy' does not stop there; on the contrary, the writer is able to go 'beyond' the mere statement made objectively to identify his or her state of being in pain: 'I can even go beyond that and [...] fantasize', Kafka explains. The proposition 'I am unhappy' is therefore but one possible offshoot of a boundless ability to dream, envision, imagine – a fabricatory ability inherently connected to the occurrence of pain.⁵ The claim that the subject is unhappy is therefore not 'objective' in the sense of truthful; it is 'objectified' in the sense of disarticulated from the phenomenal state it set out to describe and constituted in terms of a new *linguistic* 'reality'.

Instead of allowing the subject to formulate a logical claim that speaks the truth about an objective reality, pain cracks open a field of limitless fabrication. In structural congruence with the formalism of the sublime whose failure endows the imagination with an excess of power, Kafka, too, speaks of 'a merciful surplus of strength', the fabricatory overflow and excess that comes with the recession of the sensory in favour of a newly constituted linguistic reality. It is pivotal to note Kafka's explicit assertion that the indulgence in fabrication does not indicate a breach of truth, nor does it have any remedying effect on the phenomenal experience of pain: 'And it is not a lie, and it does not still my pain'. If the fabricatory indulgence, the sheer excess of fantasy unlocked by the

objectification of pain in writing, is not a lie, it has to be construed as equally objective as the statement 'I am unhappy'. This is possible because the term 'objective' here has ceased to function as the attribute of propositions made about the phenomenal world and has come to denominate the inscription of a linguistic reality and the constitution of reference dislodged from phenomenality.

Rather than seizing the opportunity to speak the 'truth' about the experience of pain, the expression of pain, its expressive force with which it affects and stirs up language, is founded upon the sheer difference between phenomenal and linguistic reality. This difference is indicated by the split opened up through Kafka's formulation according to which 'pain is sought to be objectified in pain'. Rather than a unified phenomenal event to which language could point, pain thus marks a threshold that runs through pain itself, severing pain from pain, the event from its linguistically constituted referent. In order to 'refer to' pain, language painfully breaks away from pain as phenomenal content in order to constitute pain as an intra-linguistic referent. The pains of presentation precede any representation of pain, and any represented pain is but the unrecognizable double of its dislocated empirical referent.

Scarry's paradigm is therefore entirely reversed: instead of actively damaging the faculty of language, pain destroys phenomenal reality and puts a fabricated referent in its place. That this newly discovered linguistic reality, birthed from the writing of pain, does not in any way coincide with the phenomenal reality we experience through sensory perception, is once again underscored in the last lines of Kafka's passage, where the writer observes how the surplus of language's fabricatory function, manifesting as sheer writerly 'strength', does not mirror the actual 'strength' of the writerly subject. To the contrary, a linguistic overflow of strength is witnessed to occur precisely as the authorial subject has 'plainly exhausted all its strength'.⁶ The strength to fabricate, therefore, is a strength born from the exhaustion of all strength, a mightless might that thrives on depletion and emaciation, the dying emanation of a debilitated subject, declining in fatigue, receding into the powerless state of pained being.

Thresholds of pain

The possibility of the referent's construction precisely in the moment of tracing a threshold is the subject of Claudia Brodsky's work on what she terms 'the architecture of the referent'. Her study relates the form of the referent to a gesture of marking and demarcating, which allows her to think of the referent not as something *given* – noumenally by thought or phenomenally by nature

– but as something *made*, coming about through the introduction of difference: a threshold. She views the process of making the referent as an architectural operation whose temporality is historical rather than stagnantly synchronous. The essential example she adduces is taken from Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, a scene in which a long-time resident of Sobibór, standing in the vast open, by the tracks leading to where the extermination camp used to be, observes Lanzmann engage in a deictic performance, a gestural demarcation of the threshold through which the impossible and lost referent is constituted: “Here” [*Ici*], he says pointing to land abutting one set of tracks, one is “inside the camp” [*à l’intérieur du camp*] [...] Moving some feet toward the train station and a second set of tracks, Lanzmann points down again: “Here,” he says, one is “outside the camp” [*à l’extérieur du camp*]’ (Brodsky 2009: 3–4). Brodsky deems this performance of deixis centring on the use of the adverb ‘here’ (*ici*) a ‘pure moment of reference’, remarkable because the gesture’s referent was obliterated, and yet the scene of deixis re-establishes it, constituting anew the fateful distinction between inside and outside.⁷

What complicates this scene of deictic *re*-presentation is the historical conscience at odds with the obliteration and oblivion that befall the objects of historical calamity. This is to say that the ‘referent’ of the camp (to use the concept of the referent uncritically for a moment) did not use to be contingent upon the performance of the deixis ‘ici’ and ‘ici’, inside and outside – it used to be *there*, built into *this* landscape, end point of *these* rails that delivered the living up to certain death. The historical reality of the camp is tied to its phenomenal presence, right there, in Sobibór, which means that Lanzmann’s gesture of marking the threshold that constitutes a ‘pure moment of reference’ amounts less to a sheer ‘making’ of the referent than to its mnemonic retrieval. The adverb ‘here’ is deployed to bring back what once was, reiterating the distinction between inside and outside that determined the camp’s devastatingly murderous logic. Instead of constituting the referent, the deictic gesture reconstitutes it in a moment of remembrance; this moment, in turn, is inherently bound up with the geographical location of the camp, the ‘place’ where the threshold used to lie; Brodsky goes so far as to speak of ‘earth’ (6).

It is this tie to a historical and phenomenally determined reality that injects into the logic of Brodsky’s understanding of reference an irreducible and obstinate ambivalence. Instead of constituting the referent per se, that is, as linguistic reality, this allegedly ‘*pure*’ moment of reference retrieves a historical reality that relied on the very distinction between inside and outside now redemarcated by the doubling of the adverb ‘ici’ and the threshold thus introduced. The structure

of Brodsky's argument is therefore torn, and the question left undecided as to where the concept of the referent is to be situated: in language or in the realm of historically concrete phenomena?

The twofold answer given in Brodsky's book leaves the structure of reference suspended between the thorough grounding in the 'earth' of history and the groundless ground of signification. On the one hand, she argues that in this 'pure moment of reference [...] void of any referential object, Lanzmann constructs a referent where all referents have been erased' (7); on the other hand, however, Brodsky concludes her analysis of the scene by claiming that 'architecture constitutes the referents, the grounds, to which historical life and language adhere' (24). While Hamacher speaks of language's referential function in terms of a 'barren formal constraint', Brodsky thus identifies architecture as the governing principle of this constraint. The attempt to bridge her two claims, however, is bound to founder, leaving the structure of reference torn and irreducibly inconsistent. For if it is indeed the case that Lanzmann is able to 'construct' the referent where there is none, this construction is entirely contingent upon the utterance of the word 'ici' – and the referent thus constituted is one that finds its place beyond the sensory, within the realm of a purely linguistically determined 'reality'. Yet the very linguistic nature of this reality is contradicted if the constitution of the referent relies on an empirically grounded 'architecture' to which language must 'adhere'.

It is impossible to reconcile Brodsky's two claims, and the reason for this impossibility lies in a categorical difference between the principles legitimizing each of them. The assertion that Lanzmann constructs the referent (*ex nihilo*, as it were), by virtue of the mere utterance of the adverb 'ici' is essentially governed by a linguistic principle according to which an expression's referent is entirely unmoored from any determinable phenomenal reality. It is this very phenomenalism, however, that legitimizes the contradictory claim according to which not language but 'architecture' is able to constitute the referent, as language must surrender to non-linguistic protocols scripting the construction of reference. In other words, if the adverb 'ici' has the power to constitute the referent, this constitution occurs independently of non-linguistic phenomena. If, however, it is a non-linguistic principle that governs the construction of the referent, regrounding it in the empirical, then language is but an instrument that functions in strict consonance with non-linguistic presettings.

As I have argued throughout this article, I am inclined toward an emphatically philological understanding of reference, one that views it as a linguistic occurrence dislodged from the sensory and empirical. Referentiality ceases to

mark the dimension in which an empirical object confirms its existence through the construction of a linguistic image, and, instead, embraces the elimination of the empirical for the sake of an entirely linguistic reality. This is not to say, however, that language's relation to history and historical pain is in perpetual jeopardy as a purely linguistic understanding would somehow render reference useless for the context of remembering and retrieving past atrocity. To refrain from confusing reference with phenomenality simply means to take into account the irreducible doubling that occurs in language – a doubling that always happens, whether the historical 'object' to which one refers is in fact 'present', or, as in Lanzmann's case, eradicated. Either way, the adverb 'ici' would trace a threshold whose place is nowhere empirically visible but entirely contained in language. The linguistic referent does not coincide with the empirical phenomenon, nor does it merely supplement it; rather, its constitution establishes a reality dislodged from any phenomenal ground.⁸ Just as the demarcation made via the deictic gesture that guides the use of the adverb 'here' is incapable of recalling, reconstituting, rephenomenalizing the camp's empirico-historical reality. It may well be the case that such 'failed' actualization of a lost reality nevertheless makes tangible the pain and suffering experienced in the past. But now this pain is accompanied by another: the pain of presentation itself, reconstituting the camp in an act of 'pure reference' – an act that necessarily fails to re-present the camp's phenomenal reality, instead delivering the pain of this very failure, the pain of a deixis grasping aimlessly in the blackout of a 'reality' uprooted from reality. This pain can justifiably be called 'linguistic', lodged in an 'ici' that has no true place or lodging.

Let me conclude with the brief consideration of another literary moment that has been situated in the context of the sublime: a poem by the Austrian expressionist Georg Trakl, which in a way ties together and, if you will, petrifies, in the most undiluted fashion, the arguments made thus far. The history of the poem's reception is quite rich and I cannot fully elucidate it here. Instead, let me draw attention to certain points that will corroborate my analysis of linguistic pain. Penned in 1913, the poem, titled 'Ein Winterabend' ['A winter's eve'], exists in two versions, the second of which became famous. I shall only quote the last of its three stanzas:

Wanderer tritt still herein;
 Schmerz versteinerte die Schwelle.
 Da erglänzt in reiner Helle
 Auf dem Tische Brot und Wein. (2005: 60–61)

[Wanderer steps silent indoors;
 Pain has petrified the threshold.
 Then shines out in purest radiance
 On the table bread and wine.]

As immediately becomes obvious, what is at stake in these lines is precisely the referential ability, so prominently highlighted by Brodsky, to make a distinction. The threshold presented in this poem manifests precisely as a threshold of pain, once again establishing the ability to distinguish ‘ici’ from ‘ici’, inside and outside. In the poem’s envisioned scene of arrival, the advent of a stranger marks the threshold’s transgression: the limit is crossed as the wanderer enters the abode’s inside in order to behold, on the table, the bounty of bread and wine, emanating the luminous splendour of a radiating brilliance.

It is precisely the moment of crossing the threshold, hence the poem’s climactic scene of entry, that conjures an instance of the sublime through which the preponderance of lived experience, along with the paradigm of the sensory, is rejected. For if the threshold in question is indeed, as the poem suggests, a threshold of pain, then there would be no going further: the threshold of pain marks the moment where an experience cannot keep escalating without risking its own loss. The *Schmerzschwelle* indicates the precise zone beyond which the subject must not venture in order not to vanish its very subjecthood – conscious, open to perception, able to cognize. The sheer movement across the threshold of pain thus opens up a sphere beyond the empirical – a sublime sphere of the suprasensory, we could say with de Man, and one that, in the context of this poem, is replete with eucharistic motives. It is thus no surprise that Rainer Nägele (2008: 170; my translation), in his brief commentary on the poem, notes, ‘The petrified threshold is structured like the sublime as it is presented in Kant. The sublime is representation of what is irrepresentable, effect of an impossibility replete with potential. It originates, it arises (just as the threshold indicates a raise) whenever something has reached its limit’. If it is indeed the case that reaching the threshold accords with the structure of the sublime, then we ought to take seriously the fact that the threshold has been ossified, turned into stone, thus made recognizable as a distinction-making threshold by a nameless pain, unfelt, and situated somewhere in an unspecified past.

The English translation of the verse in question (‘Pain has petrified the threshold’) still leaves open the possibility of a continuous connection to the present scene of entry in that the translator opted to render the sentence in the present perfect tense. The original carries a heavier sense of finality in that it

leaves no doubt about the ‘pastness’ of the threshold’s petrification: ‘Schmerz versteinerte die Schwelle’ describes a process indubitably finalized, and whose activity is located in a past devoid of any organic link to the present moment. Contrary to what the syntax might suggest – the semicolon anticipating the threshold’s petrification as an *effect* of the wanderer’s entry – the verb tenses used make clear that the two events are lodged in two distinct time-spaces, one unfolding in a kind of revelatory present while the other points toward an inaccessible anterior. It is in this anterior that the threshold is established (‘petrified’) and the distinction between inside and outside is delineated. The threshold needs to be firmly in place to allow for the wanderer’s entry. It is therefore not the wanderer’s pain that made the scene of transgression possible; instead, it is a pain located at the very root of the scene’s representation, its nameless and timeless remove functioning as the condition of possibility for the spectacle of the wanderer’s arrival. Without this unrepresentable pain that petrified the threshold, radically detached from the sensory and from any conscious perceptual subject, the wanderer’s arrival would not be imaginable. The scene could not find representation in the poem without the pain that petrified the very threshold whose crossing signals the poem’s climactic scene.

It is as though pain carries a certain formative quality allowing it to make forms and their representation possible, as in Trakl’s scene of advent, but at the same time it can also corrode these forms and eliminate their sensory reality. Such is the experience of the sublime. In the case of Trakl’s ‘A winter’s eve’, the reader witnesses less the sheer collapse of representation than the exhibition of its very conditionality upon a pain whose sublime nature renders it irrepresentable. This is to say that if the poem’s pain is responsible for the petrification of the threshold that allows for the final advent and thus its transgression to take place, the very force or process, the sheer linguistic occurrence that formed the threshold, thus making it representable, remains at an unbridgeable remove from any possible representation: the pain that ‘tells’ the story of the wanderer’s arrival (or, to be more precise, the pain that renders the story *tellable*) cannot itself be part of the narrative.

In his influential reading of the poem, Martin Heidegger (1971: 201–202) makes a similar observation in that he locates the poem’s pain at the ground of the possibility of difference and distinction making as such. ‘But what is pain?’ he asks in response to Trakl’s verse, and continues,

Pain rends. It is the rift. But it does not tear apart into dispersive fragments. Pain indeed, tears asunder, it separates, yet so that at the same

time it draws everything to itself [...] Pain is the joining of the rift. The joining is the threshold. It settles the between, the middle of the two that are separated in it. Pain joins the rift of the difference. Pain is the difference itself.

The essential ambivalence that Heidegger discerns in the occurrence of pain, the simultaneous tearing asunder and joining of the rift, implies that pain cannot fall on or be subject to either side of the distinction it makes. That is, before the threshold can be seen as a marker of distinction, what it separates already lies conjoined in the very zone of the threshold which is disclosed as the space of pain. Tying this insight back to my discussion of Kafka, it is therefore important to note that the ‘linguistic pain’ we thus located at the foundation of all possible representation in language is not merely the correlate of any empirically observable phenomenon. Hence the ‘doubling’ of pain I discerned above does *not* imply the mere representational doubling of an empirical pain into its linguistic counterpart, distinguishing pain’s phenomenon from its linguistic ‘objectification’. It is most critical to understand that so long as we speak of ‘phenomena’ or ‘objects’ we presuppose a phenomenological structure that relies on the subject–object distinction and thus needs a subject to centre experience. Hence the question will always return as to where we can localize the subjective consciousness experiencing these pains (even in their doubling).

The kind of pain that emerges (and refuses to emerge) in Trakl thus has to be fathomed in a more fundamental way, as situated even *prior* to the very distinction that separates empirical pain from its linguistic doubling: a pain that allows for this distinction to be made in the first place, thus a pain that can ‘petrify’ the threshold between phenomena and their representation – ultimately, a pain without which representation would not be possible. If this formless pain is still to be considered ‘linguistic’, then only in such a way that it is severed from the primacy of linguistic ‘objectification’. It constitutes a linguistic force that tears beneath cognizable structures rather than anything that could be empirically perceived or formally known.

Notes

- 1 For a counterpoint, consider Daniel Heller-Roazen’s *Echolalias* (2008: 18), wherein he asks, ‘What would it mean for the primary form of human speech to be not a statement, a question, or a naming but an exclamation?’

- 2 Jean E. Jackson diverts from Scarry precisely in that she sees the possibility of construing even the loss of language in linguistic terms: ‘embodied communication’, she writes (2000: 163) about the experience of pain, ‘is clearly taking place, but it is so different from everyday communication that the two are virtually incommensurable. The experience of “seeing stars,” stripped of this metaphor, illustrates what I mean by “the language of pain.” We might call it “anti-language,” so antithetical is it to ordinary natural language’. While the phantasm of an ‘ordinary natural language’ definitely puts up a red flag, the idea that the retreat of effability, in the way in which the experience of pain displays it, itself takes place as an emphatically *linguistic* occurrence, is hardly refutable.
- 3 A moment in Hamacher’s essay ‘Other pains’ reveals a similar structure: discussing the trope ‘that God has died’ in Hegel, Hamacher concludes that this expression indicates ‘the pain of consciousness having lost itself’ (2017: 979), thus a pain that occurs beyond its conscious experience. In a different context, Hamacher explicitly addresses the sublime and its impact on presentation, reaching a conclusion akin to de Man’s: ‘Kant’s Analytic of the Sublime is not so much concerned with the presentation of, for example, an earthquake as with an earthquake of presentation without which there would be no presentation at all’ (1996: 277). In this sense, it may be equally legitimate to claim that without ‘linguistic pain’ there would be no representation in language at all.
- 4 It is likely that this diary entry was influenced by Kafka’s encounter with the proto-phenomenologist Franz Brentano, who makes a similar observation in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* when dwelling on the difference between physical and mental phenomena and the inconsistencies that arise when we confuse them. Interestingly enough, this confusion is of a linguistic nature and related to ‘the fact that the quality which precedes the feeling and the feeling itself do not have two distinct names. The physical phenomenon which appears along with the feeling of pain is also called pain. Indeed, we do not say that we sense this or that phenomenon in the foot with pain; we say that we feel pain in the foot’ (Brentano 2009: 64). I would like to thank Kristina Mendicino for our inspiring conversations about Kafka and phenomenology.
- 5 One thinks of Virginia Woolf’s (2002: 7) observation that, faced with a certain ‘poverty in language’, the pain-ridden writer ‘is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out’. Rather than indicating language’s failure to express pain, this passage can be read as identifying in pain a moment radically *generative* of language. Instead of serving the purpose of objectively capturing pain, the lexicon of pain is created by pain itself, pressing upon pure sound in the pursuit of ‘a brand new word’. Recalling Butler’s concerns in

Excitable Speech, we might also discern a certain *violence* that lurks behind the coinage of words as Woolf envisions it: a sheer crushing together that happens entirely *in* and *to* language.

- 6 Reading Paul Celan's poem 'Die Silbe Schmerz' ('The syllable pain'), Michael Levine (2018: 19; my translation) discovers a structure similar to Kafka's surplus in that he puts (linguistic) pain in direct relation with the sheer *potential* it may set free: 'The effects of the unleashing [of] linguistic force are so numerous and diverse that we ought to ask about their cause and their relationship with pain'.
- 7 Even though I do not have the resources to discuss his work in the context of this article, it would be remiss not to mention Jean-François Lyotard's (1988) efforts precisely to combine an analysis of the sublime with an understanding of the Holocaust and its representability. With respect to my argument here, it is important to note that I am not engaging with Lanzmann's specific documentary practice and the way in which it utilizes 'lived experience' in the pursuit of something irrepresentable. At stake is not the problem of referentiality in Lanzmann, but merely Brodsky's reading of a particular moment in *Shoah*.
- 8 A dictum of Peter Szondi's (1986: 5) comes to mind in which he unequivocally argues 'that philological knowledge is fundamentally different from historical knowledge'.

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