

Killing Pain with Language

Alice Butler

Can a word be onomatopoeic when that word is a feeling?

From the desperate and breathless 'p', to the middle cry of 'a' and 'i', to the final 'n' that cuts the word short like a knife, it is a word (and experience) that we both know and don't know. It is a familiar sensation but strangely indescribable at the same time, repeatedly defeating us:

PAIN.

In reality, it is an affect curiously inaudible: we only know it's there through the guttural noises we use to communicate it – be it a screeching hysteria, or a numbing string of unrecognisable morphemes. The corporeality of pain, speaking...

and fragmenting.

(Almost silent.)

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As Virginia Woolf writes in *The Waves* (1931): *But for pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures... sounds very remote and then very close; flesh being gashed and blood spurting, a joint suddenly twisted – beneath all of which appears something very remote, to be just held in solitude...*

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Pain turns us into babies without words yet. There is no language to describe pain, partly because it is situated in head and body, but without the lines of thought to process it. Insofar as pain is irrational, it is located beyond knowable linguistic

structures. It an area of experience that is absolutely subjective, a state of overburdening, alienating affect, which stops the construction of verbal sense with its blurry, bodily nonsense.

... pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an aversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned... (Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 1985)

There is no grand master narrative to turn to for the pain that we feel, as individuals or collectives. It can be acute suffering; indescribable mourning; internal bleeding, or external injury. It can be heartache or headache. Pain is physical and psychological; it is felt in body and mind – a feeling that is so very difficult to imagine in another person. Attempting empathy is a risky business, as there are grey areas of pain. It can be silent or invisible, when things are contracting below the surface. The smallest of triggers that render it more than fantasy.

As Leslie Jamison writes in her book of essays *The Empathy Exams* (2014), while recounting her experiences as a medical actor: *Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries. Sadness becomes a seizure. Empathy demands another kind of porousness in response. My Stephanie script is twelve pages long. I think mainly about what it doesn't say.*

The closing essay of the collection is titled 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain', in which the author takes the cultural history (and relentless stereotyping) of the walking-woman-wounded to task. She notes: *I think the possibility of fetishizing pain is no reason to stop representing it. Pain that gets performed is still pain. Pain turned trite is still pain. I think the charges of cliché and performance offer our closed hearts too many alibis, and I want our hearts to be open. I just wrote that. I want our hearts to be open. I meant it.*

This is Jamison writing through her pain as she filters her vulnerability through language, and through writing. It is as porous as the empathy she desires, the body seeping and coagulating with the words she finds.

And the words she makes public.

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Pain itself is a mystery. No-one really knows the nature of pain and how we actually feel it. (Joanna Rajkowska, 12.09.2015)

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Where the Beast is Buried (2013), a book by the Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska, performs intimacy (and pain) in a similar way to Jamison, as the stories of how her artworks were made (or devised, as many of them remain unrealised) unfold alongside more personal fragments of retrospective, autobiographical context. And so she writes of her mother's decline into Alzheimer's candidly and frankly (*I was riddled with fear that she would get lost while out walking, that she would forget to turn off a gas tap or simply forget what a window was and the sheer drop on the other side of it.*) – the confessional prologue to the 2004 work *Hello*, an event documented by a film, in which Rajkowska waved a *big white hankie* whilst standing on the roof of the Cœur Défense tower block in Paris. Working in public space, the artist places her own body in relation to the stretched and sprawling metropolis, a slight human figure in and amongst the silver, windowed artifice.

Waving hello at the sheer drop.

Rajkowska's use of language also relies upon a merging of body and exposure, as the intimate is processed and appropriated by its public context. Calling to mind Lauren Berlant's *there is nothing more public than privacy*, in her own writing, Rajkowska uses the private and personal as a way of working outwards, from interior affect to material effect. The word pain is repeated intermittently throughout the book's chapters: she describes her traumatic labour as a *pain beyond all imagination, beyond all conceivable experience. It is a pain that punishes, a pain that is claustrophobic*; Berlin as a city that *refuses to be naked, to expose its wounds or its painful side*; and calls her engagement with sexuality early in her career as *rather... painful*.

Pain might resist spoken language – it might stupefy it or scare it into submission – but it is also possible to write with pain and in pain, for to write is a bodily experience anyway. There are charges we can follow, or intimate – as in feel, sense. But also as in closeness and desire: for the writing of pain evolves from embodiment and intimacy, of a getting to know one’s body and mind.

Writing is my most precise instrument of analysis, it reveals the project by translating it through language and, surprisingly, through my own body. Because what is missing in the immediate experience presents itself in the language. (Joanna Rajkowska, *Where the Beast is Buried*, 2013)

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I’ve been writing this text in pain, too. I got a back injury on holiday and then slept in a tent for a week; before a disaster at the launderette on return meant 20 kilogrammes of dripping wet washing on my back, making the pain worse. The water was running down my leg: it looked like I’d wet myself, and lorry drivers beeped their horns. (Painful embarrassment.) To start with, I took the usual doses of ibuprofen, and then I was intrigued to see what would happen if I wrote through the pain, my body twisted over the desk, spawning sentences. Sometimes pain should be left to its own devices. It can work its magic, without the chemicals to make it disappear.

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In the same way as Rajkowska’s autobiographical criticism proposes a rethinking of public intimacy, the artist’s practice is similarly engaged with the body as an intimate object in contact with public environments. From the 1994 performance *Let Me Wash Your Hands*, in which Rajkowska cleaned and sterilised the hands of others with iodine, to the 2012 *Born in Berlin*, whereby she challenged the impact of birthplace upon one’s biography, Rajkowska’s events, performances, sculptures and films position the body as a polymorphous, public object, in conversation with the people and materials that touch upon it. Realised in the intimate, granular tones of Super 8, *Born in Berlin* documents the artist’s pregnancy with her daughter, Rosa: the recognisable facades of public-space buildings and street-signed motorways

bleed into ('private') images of showering nakedness, before the naked and pregnant body climbs all over the public buildings. It is a film of twisted and manipulated autobiography, the artist's expanding stomach a foil to an expanded narrative of what it might mean to be born into, and speak, in a city of shifting history and shifting voice.

In *Where the Beast is Buried*, Rajkowska uses figurative language to characterise the declining face of Berlin, Rosa's parental polis: it is a *middle-aged man, good-looking, well-dressed but at the same time worn out after years of suffering from a chronic disease that climaxed back. Exhausted not only by what it has been through, but also by attempts to verbalize it, the lack of language, the following complications and the amount of painkillers it needs to take daily.*

In her current work for the exhibition at l'étrangère gallery in London, Rajkowska examines this urgent desire for pharmaceutical relief, the white powder we take to kill the pain, and let us live.

Or let us die.

It's there in the conjunctive. Not so much onomatopoeic as downright literal. These drugs are weapons; the science of their success is also the science of the atomic bomb. They inflict pain as much as they numb it – these painKILLERS.

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Their value lies entirely in the fact that these objects have a history; they have an identity that comes from somewhere else; comes entirely from the killing industry and the intimacy of killing. There is a body relation. They are designed for the bodies of the perpetrators and for the bodies of the victims. (Joanna Rajkowska, 12.09.2015)

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Painkillers is an exhibition about bodies, drugs, art and war. Over the course of two series of nine sculptures, cast life-size from historical weapons, and using

powdered analgesic and polyurethane resin in the mould, the artist looks to invoke a conversation surrounding the disturbingly close relationship between the military and pharmaceutical industries, and the often dangerous and fatal ways we use our science. (If progress is painkillers, then progress is also killing...) From the *M4A1 carbine* produced by the United States in 1994, to Israel's 1954 *Uzi submachine gun*, Rajkowska's replicate sculptures – their plinth-bound aesthetic unnervingly close to a modernist sculpture, or a conceptual artwork – remind us of these weapons' terrifying global usage, while the materials that comprise them suggest a secondary subtext of terror: that of medicine feeding war. Relieving pain, and relieving life: simultaneously. The *Soon Everything Will Change* (2014) amethyst crystal installation in the second room of the gallery perhaps signifies that relief is more likely to be found in a space beyond human knowledge and artifice.

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If, as Rajkowska confides to me in a 'private' conversation, *America is a country that is running on drugs; it is so common that people don't even think about it or talk publicly about it*, then in her work for *Painkillers*, she has publicised this concern through a series of sculptures in which form and material combine as 'message'. In many ways, they perform as statements and testimonies, just like the fragments that recur in her book. It is up to the viewer to challenge them, or simply think about them, before they take a painkiller for their morning headache.

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Rajkowska's research into this field of enquiry began with various historical narratives, all marked by a paradoxical relationship to the industries of both pharmacology and conflict: from the (rumoured) germ warfare that the British conducted against the Native American population, during the 1763 Siege of Fort Pitt, to the Soviet Union's notorious 'Biopreparat' programme, which was run by the Ministry of Health, and encouraged the use of molecular biology in the production of modern weapons. Rajkowska's uses history as a way to think about and probe the contemporary; the question being (and there are no answers provided): could it be that armament production and pharmaceutical research are funded by the same

businesses, developed by the same technology, and generated by the same knowledge, the same people?

Unrelenting in her questions, the artist is exposing the insides of the lock-and-keyed censored archive, making public the hidden, dirty facts. And rewriting history, or the way we use it, in the process.

(Just because the weapons are white, it does not mean they are clean.)

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The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. Our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance. But so, too, does the fate of the reality of certain lives and deaths as well as the ability to think critically and publicly about the effects of war. (Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 2006)

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A perfect white sphere that has been cut in half balances on its plinth, cradling a smaller sphere within its core: a smooth and symmetrical sculpture, it has a convex curvature that is exact, designed with rhythm and harmony in mind. But this object is not only a sculpture; it is also a weapon: the *Model of Israeli Nuclear Weapon Core*, as photographed by Mordechai Vanunu in 1985, to be precise. Designed according to death. It is a schizophrenic sculpture, oscillating between art, artillery and medicine. Never remaining in one defined position. Rajkowska's work for *Painkillers* is not only questioning the relationship between the industries of pharmacology and warfare, it is equally sceptical of the art world's involvement in this; its damaging indebtedness to the arms trade, however visible or invisible those dealings are. And not that the artist sees herself practicing outside of this: in fact, herein lies the works' potential. As Rajkowska appropriates the forms of bombs, grenades and guns (in the manner of a prop maker), alongside mimicking the

archetypal modernist white-cube sculpture, the artist confesses to – and in so doing, questions – the gorily intimate connection between art and weapons.

And with this intimacy, comes a return to the body – Rajkowska's primary source of material. The corporeal is not absent from this exhibition, for all of its lack of figurative flesh. These sculptured weapons activate the bodies that made them, touched them, and dreamt them – the brutal minds of intellect and science; as well as the bodies and ghosts of the victims, to whom the objects were directed. Upon viewing the 1768 *Small-pox infected* blanket, in 2015, I think of the cold body that once wrapped it around herself, unknowing of what it would do.

She thought it would help the pain.

She thought it would kill it.

But it just killed *her*.