



*Plate 1. The Human Body. Engraving 1812-19*

# The Body in Pain

THE MAKING AND UNMAKING  
OF THE WORLD

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New York    Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1985

## INTRODUCTION

**A**LTHOUGH this book has only a single subject, that subject can itself be divided into three different subjects: *first*, the difficulty of expressing physical pain; *second*, the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty; and *third*, the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or, more simply, the nature of human creation.

It might be best to picture these three subjects as three concentric circles, for when we enter into the innermost space of the first, we quickly discover that we are (whether or not this is what we intended) already standing within the wider circumference of the second, and no sooner do we make that discovery than we learn we have all along been standing in the midst of the third. To be at the center of any one of them is to be, simultaneously, at the center of all three.

Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the inseparability of these three subjects, their embeddedness in one another. Although it is the task of this book to record that story—and hence to make visible the larger structures of entailment—it may be useful here at the opening to speak briefly of each subject in isolation.

### **The Inexpressibility of Physical Pain**

When one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. Or alternatively, it may seem as distant as the interstellar events referred to by scientists who speak to us mysteriously of not yet detectable intergalactic screams<sup>1</sup> or of "very distant Seyfert galaxies, a class

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of objects within which violent events of unknown nature occur from time to time."<sup>2</sup>

Vaguely alarming yet unreal, laden with consequence yet evaporating before the mind because not available to sensory confirmation, unseeable classes of objects such as subterranean plates, Seyfert galaxies, and the pains occurring in other people's bodies flicker before the mind, then disappear.

Physical pain happens, of course, not several miles below our feet or many miles above our heads but within the bodies of persons who inhabit the world through which we each day make our way, and who may at any moment be separated from us by only a space of several inches. The very temptation to invoke analogies to remote cosmologies (and there is a long tradition of such analogies) is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons.

Thus when one speaks about "one's own physical pain" and about "another person's physical pain," one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is "effortlessly" grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot *not* be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is "effortless" is *not* grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and, finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the "it" one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual "it"). So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that "having pain" may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to "have certainty," while for the other person it is so elusive that "hearing about pain" may exist as the primary model of what it is "to have doubt." Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. "English," writes Virginia Woolf, "which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache. . . . The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry."<sup>3</sup> True of the headache, Woolf's account is of course more radically true of the severe and prolonged pain that may accompany cancer or burns or phantom limb or stroke, as well as of the severe and prolonged pain that may occur unaccompanied by any nameable disease. Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

Though Woolf frames her observation in terms of one particular language, the essential problem she describes, not limited to English, is characteristic of all languages. This is not to say that one encounters *no* variations in the expressibility of pain as one moves across different languages. The existence of culturally stipulated responses to pain—for example, the tendency of one population to vocalize cries; the tendency of another to suppress them—is well documented in anthropological research. So, too, a particular constellation of sounds or words that make it possible to register alterations in the felt-experience of pain in one language may have no equivalent in a second language: thus Sophocles's agonized Philoctetes utters a cascade of *changing* cries and shrieks that in the original Greek are accommodated by an array of formal words (some of them twelve syllables long), but that at least one translator found could only be rendered in English by the uniform syllable "Ah" followed by variations in punctuation (Ah! Ah!!!!). But even if one were to enumerate many additional examples, such cultural differences, taken collectively, would themselves constitute only a very narrow margin of variation and would thus in the end work to expose and confirm the universal sameness of the central problem, a problem that originates much less in the inflexibility of any one language or in the shyness of any one culture than in the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is.

Why pain should so centrally entail, require, this shattering of language will only gradually become apparent over the course of many pages; but an approximation of the explanation may be partially apprehended by noticing the exceptional character of pain when compared to all our other interior states. Contemporary philosophers have habituated us to the recognition that our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world, that we do not simply "have feelings" but have feelings *for* somebody or something, that love is love of *x*, fear is fear of *y*, ambivalence is ambivalence about *z*. If one were to move through all the emotional, perceptual, and somatic states that take an object—hatred for, seeing of, being hungry for—the list would become a very long one and, though it would alternate between states we are thankful for and those we dislike, it would be throughout its entirety a consistent affirmation of the human being's capacity to move out beyond the boundaries of his or her own body into the external, sharable world.<sup>4</sup> This list and its implicit affirmation would, however, be suddenly interrupted when, moving through the human interior, one at last reached physical pain, for physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.

Often, a state of consciousness other than pain will, if deprived of its object, begin to approach the neighborhood of physical pain; conversely, when physical pain is transformed into an objectified state, it (or at least some of its aversiveness)

is eliminated. A great deal, then, is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing *pain itself* into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequence.

Who are the authors of this attempted reversal, the creators or near-creators of a language for pain? Because the words of five different groups of women and men have been regularly consulted in the preliminary thinking for this book, it will be helpful to name them here, though they together constitute only a very partial list of all those who have entered into the long history of this struggle.

First, of course, are individuals who have themselves been in great pain and whose words are later available either because they themselves remember them, because a friend remembers them, or because they have been recorded and memorialized in, for example, a written case history. Though the total number of words may be meager, though they may be hurled into the air unattached to any framing sentence, something can be learned from these verbal fragments not only about pain but about the human capacity for word-making. To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself.

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. Though there are very great impediments to expressing another's sentient distress, so are there also very great reasons why one might want to do so, and thus there come to be avenues by which this most radically private of experiences begins to enter the realm of public discourse. Here are four such avenues.

Perhaps the most obvious is medicine, for the success of the physician's work will often depend on the acuity with which he or she can hear the fragmentary language of pain, coax it into clarity, and interpret it. The hesitation built into the previous sentence—"perhaps the most obvious"—acknowledges the fact that many people's experience of the medical community would bear out the opposite conclusion, the conclusion that physicians do not trust (hence, hear) the human voice, that they in effect perceive the voice of the patient as an "unreliable narrator" of bodily events, a voice which must be bypassed as quickly as possible so that they can get around and behind it to the physical events themselves. But if the only external sign of the felt-experience of pain (for which there is no alteration in the blood count, no shadow on the X ray, no pattern on the CAT scan) is the patient's verbal report (however itself in-

adequate), then to bypass the voice is to bypass the bodily event, to bypass the patient, to bypass the person in pain. Thus the reality of a patient's X-rayable cancer may be believed-in but the accompanying pain disbelieved and the pain medication underprescribed. Medical contexts, like all other contexts of human experience, provide instances of the alarming phenomenon noted earlier: to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt. (The doubt of other persons, here as elsewhere, amplifies the suffering of those already in pain.)

Medical contexts, however, also provide many counterinstances; and though this has historically long been the case (for there have always been individual physicians whose daily work was premised on both a deep affection for the human body and a profound respect for the human voice), it has become especially true of the present era of medicine, which has begun to focus increasing attention on the nature and treatment of pain.

The extent to which medical research on the physical problem of pain is simultaneously bound up with the problem of language creation is best illustrated by what may at first appear to be only a coincidence: the person who discovered what is now considered the most compelling and potentially accurate theoretical model of the physiology of pain is also the person who invented a diagnostic tool that enables patients to articulate the individual character of their pain with greater precision than was previously possible. Ronald Melzack, who has with his colleague Patrick Wall authored the widely respected and celebrated "Gate-Control Theory of Pain," has also with his colleague W. S. Torgerson developed the "McGill Pain Questionnaire" that, less well-known, is itself quietly celebrated in the day-by-day world of the hospital and pain clinic.

The invention of the diagnostic questionnaire was in part occasioned by Melzack's recognition that the conventional medical vocabulary ("moderate pain," "severe pain") described only one limited aspect of pain, its intensity; and that describing pain only in terms of this solitary dimension was equivalent to describing the complex realm of visual experience exclusively in terms of light flux.<sup>5</sup> Thus he and Torgerson, after gathering the apparently random words most often spoken by patients, began to arrange those words into coherent groups which, by making visible the consistency interior to any one set of words, worked to bestow visibility on the characteristics of pain. When heard in isolation, any one adjective such as "throbbing pain" or "burning pain" may appear to convey very little precise information beyond the general fact that the speaker is in distress. But when "throbbing" is placed in the company of certain other commonly occurring words ("flickering," "quivering," "pulsing," "throbbing," and "beating"), it is clear that all five of them express, with varying degrees of intensity, a rhythmic on-off sensation, and thus it is also clear that one coherent dimension of the felt-experience of pain is this "temporal dimension." Similarly, when "burning" is placed in the context of three other words ("hot pain,"

“burning pain,” “scalding pain,” “searing pain”), it is apparent that these words, though once more differing importantly in their intensity, are alike in registering the existence of a “thermal dimension” to pain. Again, the words “pinching,” “pressing,” “gnawing,” “cramping,” and “crushing,” together express what Melzack and Torgerson have designated as “constrictive pressure.” Out of these categories larger categories are formed; for the “temporal,” “thermal,” and “constrictive” groups are among those that together express the *sensory* content of pain, while certain other word groupings express pain’s *af-fective* content, and still others its evaluative or *cognitive* content.

Although the precise sensitivity of this diagnostic tool will only be fully determined after additional years of testing and use, it is already certain that the questionnaire enables patients to generate descriptions more easily.<sup>6</sup> It has also become evident that the particular array of words chosen by the patient may help to indicate the presence or absence of a particular disease as well as the most effective means of diminishing the pain. The choice of the three words “searing,” “pulsing,” and “shooting,” for example, tells the physician that the patient’s pain is characterized by the thermal, temporal, and spatial dimensions. Because this particular triad of dimensions is more characteristic of some diseases than of others, the physician knows whether arthritis or instead cancer or instead nerve damage should be suspected as a possible accompaniment. Again, because pain characterized by this particular triad of dimensions has begun to be shown (in the initial years of the questionnaire’s use) to be more susceptible to some forms of therapy or medication than others, the physician knows how best to begin the longed-for healing process.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that either the medical problem of pain or the problem of expressing pain in medical contexts has been solved. But through the mediating structures of this diagnostic questionnaire, language (“as if,” T. S. Eliot might say, “a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen”) has begun to become capable of providing an external image of interior events. Melzack and Torgerson have not discovered new words but have instead uncovered a structure residing in the narrow, already-existing vocabulary, the vocabulary originated by patients themselves. Thus necessary to the invention of this diagnostic tool was Melzack’s assumption that the human voice, far from being untrustworthy, is capable of accurately exposing even the most resistant aspects of material reality. The depth of his belief in the referential powers of the human voice only becomes visible, however, when one recognizes that he has found in language not only the record of the felt-experience of pain, the signs of accompanying disease, and the invitation to appropriate treatment (as are all suggested by the McGill Questionnaire) but has found there even the secrets of the neurological and physiological pathways themselves; for, according to his own account,<sup>7</sup> it was while listening to the language of his patients that

he first intuited what in its later formulation became known to us as the “Gate-Control Theory of Pain.”

This same trust in language also characterizes the work occurring in several nonmedical contexts; and so, in addition to medical case histories and diagnostic questionnaires, there come to be other verbal documents—the publications of Amnesty International, the transcripts of personal injury trials, the poems and narratives of individual artists—that also record the passage of pain into speech. Each of these three enables pain to enter into a realm of shared discourse that is wider, more social, than that which characterizes the relatively intimate conversation of patient and physician. Because this public realm is of central concern in this book, each of the three will be extensively drawn on, at times appearing in the foreground and at other times in the background of the arguments being made.

Amnesty International’s ability to bring about the cessation of torture depends centrally on its ability to communicate the reality of physical pain to those who are not themselves in pain. When, for example, one receives a letter from Amnesty in the mail, the words of that letter must somehow convey to the reader the aversiveness being experienced inside the body of someone whose country may be far away, whose name can barely be pronounced, and whose ordinary life is unknown except that it is known that that ordinary life has ceased to exist. The language of the letter must also resist and overcome the inherent pressures toward tonal instability: that language must at once be characterized by the greatest possible tact (for the most intimate realm of another human being’s body is the implicit or explicit subject) and by the greatest possible immediacy (for the most crucial fact about pain is *its presentness* and the most crucial fact about torture is that it *is happening*). Tact and immediacy ordinarily work against one another; thus the difficulty of sustaining either tone is compounded by the necessity of sustaining both simultaneously.

The goal of the letter is not simply to make the reader a passive recipient of information about torture but to encourage his or her active assistance in eliminating torture. The “reader of the letter” may now, for example, become the “writer of a letter”: that is, the person may begin to use his own language (though he may also draw on the language provided by Amnesty International, as Amnesty International in its formulations in turn has drawn on the language of former political prisoners) to address appropriate government officials or others who may have the authority to stop the torture. As even this brief description suggests, embedded in Amnesty’s work, as in medical work, is the assumption that the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain. It is also true that here, as in medicine, the human voice must aspire to become a precise reflection of material reality: Amnesty’s ability to stop torture depends on its international authority, and its international authority depends on its reputation for consistent accuracy; the words “someone

is being tortured" cannot be, and are never, pronounced unless it *is* the case that someone is being tortured.<sup>8</sup>

A fourth arena in which physical pain begins to enter language is the courtroom, for sometimes when a person has been very seriously injured, a civil suit follows; and the concept of compensation extends not only to the visible bodily injury but to the invisible experience of physical suffering. Viewed from a distance, such litigation may seem to lack the moral clarity of the work occurring at Amnesty International or in medical contexts. Here, for example, it is not immediately apparent in exactly what way the verbal act of expressing pain (which may result in a monetary award to the plaintiff) helps to eliminate the physical fact of the pain. Furthermore, built into the very structure of the case is a dispute about the correspondence between language and material reality: the accuracy of the descriptions of suffering given by the plaintiff's lawyer may be contested by the defendant's lawyer (though in instances involving extreme hurt, this tends not to be so). Why a civilization that invents medical institutions and international organizations like Amnesty International should also invent legal "remedies" for bodily suffering will eventually become clear. For the moment it is enough simply to notice that, whatever else is true, such litigation provides a situation that once again requires that the impediments to expressing pain be overcome. Under the pressure of this requirement, the lawyer, too, becomes an inventor of language, one who speaks *on behalf of* another person (the plaintiff) and attempts to communicate the reality of that person's physical pain to people who are not themselves in pain (the jurors).

A fifth and final source is art, and thus we come full circle back to Virginia Woolf's complaint about the absence (or what should more accurately be designated the "near-absence") of literary representations of pain. Alarmed and dismayed by his or her own failure of language, the person in pain might find it reassuring to learn that even the artist—whose lifework and everyday habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech—ordinarily falls silent before pain. The isolated instances in which this is not so, however, provide a much more compelling (because usable) form of reassurance—fictional analogues, perhaps whole paragraphs of words, that can be borrowed when the real-life crisis of silence comes.

Here and there in the vast expanse of literary texts, one comes upon an isolated play, an exceptional film, an extraordinary novel that is not just incidentally but centrally and uninterruptedly about the nature of bodily pain. In Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, the fate of an entire civilization is suspended in order to allow the ambassadors of that civilization to stop and take account of the nature of the human body, the wound in that body, the pain in that wound. Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* opens with a woman's diary entry, "It is Monday morning and I am in pain," and becomes throughout its duration (a duration that required that its cinematographer photograph two hundred different background shades of red)

a sustained attempt to lift the interior facts of bodily sentience out of the inarticulate pre-language of "cries and whispers" into the realm of shared objectification.

More often, though still with great rarity, the subject may enter briefly into a small corner of a literary text, and such passages, whether a single line or a scene, may work to expose its attributes, even if the writer has merely shouted at pain, has resorted to name-calling ("the useless, unjust, incomprehensible, inept abomination that is physical pain," writes Huysmans<sup>9</sup>), or has instead bestowed on it a single name: "I have given a name to my pain and call it 'dog,'" announces Nietzsche in a brilliantly magisterial pretense of having at last gained the upper hand; "It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog—and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives."<sup>10</sup> In the isolation of pain, even the most uncompromising advocate of individualism might suddenly prefer a realm populated by companions, however imaginary and safely subordinate.

The rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature is most striking when seen within the framing fact of how consistently art confers visibility on other forms of distress (the thoughts of Hamlet, the tragedy of Lear, the heartache of Woolf's "merest schoolgirl"). *Psychological* suffering, though often difficult for any one person to express, *does* have referential content, *is* susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that, as Thomas Mann's Settembrini reminds us, there is virtually no piece of literature that is *not* about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand by ready to assist us. The issue of "assistance" is not, of course, a self-evident one: there is always the danger that a fictional character's suffering (whether physical or psychological) will divert our attention away from the living sister or uncle who can be helped by our compassion in a way that the fictional character cannot be; there is also the danger that because artists so successfully express suffering, they may themselves collectively come to be thought of as the most authentic class of sufferers, and thus may inadvertently appropriate concern away from others in radical need of assistance.

These possibilities, however, only call our attention back to the general question about the relation between expressing pain and eliminating pain that has arisen in each of the contexts of verbalization described earlier. The importance of this question will become more apparent once we move to our second subject.

### The Political Consequences of Pain's Inexpressibility

Though the overt subject of the preceding discussion was the difficulty of expressing physical pain, at every moment lingering nearby was another subject, the political complications that arise as a result of that difficulty. How intricately

the problem of pain is bound up with the problem of power can be briefly indicated by returning to the four central observations that surfaced earlier and seeing how laden with political consequence each of the four is.

First, we noticed that it often happens that two people can be in a room together, the one in pain, the other either partially or wholly unaware of the first person's pain. But the implicit question that is being asked here, "How is it that one person can be in the presence of another person in pain and not know it?," leads inevitably to a second question that will be dealt with extensively in this book, "How is it that one person can be in the presence of another person in pain and not know it—not know it to the point where he himself inflicts it, and goes on inflicting it?"

Second, it was observed that ordinarily there is no language for pain, that it (more than any other phenomenon) resists verbal objectification. But the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be *verbally represented* also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*. If, for example, it were easier to express intellectual aspiration than bodily hunger, one would expect to find that the problem of education had a greater degree of social recognition than the problem of malnutrition or famine; or again, if property (as well as the ways in which property can be jeopardized) were easier to describe than bodily disability (as well as the ways in which a disabled person can be jeopardized), then one would not be astonished to discover that a society had developed sophisticated procedures for protecting "property rights" long before it had succeeded in formulating the concept of "the rights of the handicapped." It is not simply accurate but tautological to observe that given any two phenomena, the one that is more visible will receive more attention. But the sentient fact of physical pain is not simply somewhat less easy to express than some second event, not simply somewhat less visible than some second event, but so nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible, that the problem goes beyond the possibility that almost any other phenomenon occupying the same environment will distract attention from it. Indeed, even where it is virtually the only content in a given environment, it will be possible to describe that environment as though the pain were not there. Thus, for example, torture comes to be described—not only by regimes that torture but sometimes by people who stand outside those regimes—as a form of *information-gathering* or (in its even more remarkable formulation) *intelligence-gathering*; and uncovering the perceptual processes that permit this misdescription will be the first step in the extended structural analysis of torture to which Chapter 1 is devoted. Similarly (though by no means identically), while the central activity of war is injuring and the central goal in war is to out-injure the opponent, the fact of injuring tends to be absent from strategic and political descriptions of war: thus Chapter 2 will open with a review of writings by Clausewitz, Liddell Hart, Churchill, Sokolovskiy and other theorists of war in order to make visible

the particular paths by which it disappears. The act of misdescribing torture or war, though in some instances intentional and in others unintentional, is in either case partially made possible by the inherent difficulty of accurately describing any event whose central content is bodily pain or injury.

The third central point that emerged earlier was an extension of the second: though there is ordinarily no language for pain, under the pressure of the desire to eliminate pain, an at least fragmentary means of verbalization is available both to those who are themselves in pain and to those who wish to speak on behalf of others. As physical pain is monolithically consistent in its assault on language, so the verbal strategies for overcoming that assault are very small in number and reappear consistently as one looks at the words of patient, physician, Amnesty worker, lawyer, artist: these verbal strategies revolve around the verbal sign of the weapon or what will eventually be called here the language of "agency." But we will also see that this verbal sign is so inherently unstable that when not carefully controlled (as it is in the contexts just cited) it can have different effects and can even be intentionally enlisted for the opposite purposes, invoked not to coax pain into visibility but to push it into further invisibility, invoked not to assist in the elimination of pain but to assist in its infliction, invoked not to extend culture (as happens in medicine, law, and art) but to dismantle that culture. The fact that the language of agency has on the one hand a radically benign potential and on the other hand a radically sadistic one does not lead to the conclusion that the two are inseparable, nor to the conclusion that those who use it in the first way are somehow implicated in the actions of those who use it in the second way. On the contrary: the two uses are not simply distinct but mutually exclusive; in fact we will see that one of the central tasks of civilization is to stabilize this most elementary sign.

The fourth major point that surfaced in the opening discussion was the recognition of the way pain enters into our midst as at once something that cannot be denied and something that cannot be confirmed (thus it comes to be cited in philosophic discourse as an example of conviction, or alternatively as an example of scepticism). To have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*. But we will see that the relation between pain and belief is even more problematic than has so far been suggested. If the felt-attributes of pain are (through one means of verbal objectification or another) lifted into the visible world, and if the referent for these now objectified attributes is understood to be the human body, then the sentient fact of the person's suffering will become knowable to a second person. It is also possible, however, for the felt-attributes of pain to be lifted into the visible world but now attached to a referent other than the human body. That is, the felt-characteristics of pain—one of which is its compelling vibrancy or its incontestable reality or simply its "certainty"—can be appropriated away from the body and presented as the attributes of something else (something which by itself lacks those attributes, something which

does not in itself appear vibrant, real, or certain). This process will throughout the argument of this book be called "*analogical verification*" or "*analogical substantiation*." It will gradually become apparent that at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief—that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation—the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of "realness" and "certainty." Part One, the first half of this book, will show how centrally those periods during which there is a breakdown in the framing assumptions of civilization depend on this process. Chapter 1 unfolds the nature of analogical verification as it occurs in torture, and Chapter 2 makes visible the crucial place it has in the structural logic of war. Part Two returns to the subject and shows that it is part of the original and ongoing project of civilization to diminish the reliance on (and to find substitutes for) this process of substantiation, and that this project comes in the west to be associated with an increased pressure toward material culture, or material self-expression.

As has become evident even in this brief review of the four initial assertions of this book (and as will become much more evident), the difficulty of articulating physical pain permits political and perceptual complications of the most serious kind. The failure to express pain—whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body—will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation.

The paths by which these political and perceptual complications arise will be traced descriptively and with little reliance on formal terminology (in part because there is no pre-existing terminology for much of what will become visible here). Very occasionally it becomes necessary to introduce into the argument a somewhat formal term in order to make it clear that a particular phenomenon encountered in an earlier chapter is now being reencountered in a later one. For example, Chapter 1 provides an extended description of the process by which the attributes of pain can be severed from the pain itself and conferred on a political construct, but does so without insisting on any single name for this process. When, however, versions of this same phenomenon reappear in Chapter 2, sections IV and V, and Chapter 4, sections I–III, it is useful to have (almost as a kind of shorthand) the name "*analogical verification*" so that the similarities as well as the critically important differences between the various versions can be talked about and assessed. There are four or five other terms (e.g., referential instability, intentional object) that at certain points become similarly necessary; but in each case the phenomenon to which the term refers will already have been

set forth, and thus the particular way it is being used (which may or may not overlap with the use of this vocabulary in other frameworks), as well as the particular array of questions that attend it, will be clear. The one exception is the phrase "language of agency" which arises at such an early moment in the book that a preliminary description and illustration may be helpful here.

Because the existing vocabulary for pain contains only a small handful of adjectives, one passes through direct descriptions very quickly and (as V. C. Medvei noted in his 1948 treatise on pain<sup>1</sup>) almost immediately encounters an "as if" structure: it feels as if . . . ; it is as though. . . . On the other side of the ellipse there reappear again and again (regardless of whether the immediate context of the vocalization is medical or literary or legal) two and only two metaphors, and they are metaphors whose inner workings are very problematic. The first specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain. Thus a person may say, "It feels as though a hammer is coming down on my spine" even where there is no hammer; or "It feels as if my arm is broken at each joint and the jagged ends are sticking through the skin" even where the bones of the arms are intact and the surface of the skin is unbroken. Physical pain is not identical with (and often exists without) either agency or damage, but these things are referential; consequently we often call on them to convey the experience of the pain itself.

In order to avoid confusion here, it should be noted that it is of course true that in any given instance of pain, there may actually be present a weapon (the hammer may really be there) or wound (the bones may really be coming through the skin); and the weapon or wound may immediately convey to anyone present the sentient distress of the person hurt; in fact, so suggestive will they be of the sensation of hurt that the person, if not actually in pain, may find it difficult to assure the companion that he or she is not in pain. In medical case histories of people whose pain began with an accident, the sentences describing the accident (the moment when the hammer fell from the ladder onto the person's spine) may more successfully convey the sheer fact of the patient's agony than those sentences that attempt to describe the person's pain directly, even though the impact of the hammer (lasting one second) and the pain (lasting one year) are obviously not the same (and the patient, if asked whether she has the feeling of "hammering" pain might correct us and say no, it is knife-like). The central point here is that insofar as an actual agent (a nail sticking into the bottom of the foot) and an imagined agent (a person's statement, "It feels as if there's a nail sticking into the bottom of my foot") both convey something of the felt-experience of pain to someone outside the sufferer's body, they both do so for the same reason: in neither case is the nail identical with the sentient experience of pain; and yet because it has shape, length, and color, because it either exists (in the first case) or can be pictured as existing (in the second case) at the external boundary of



the body, it begins to externalize, objectify, and make sharable what is originally an interior and unsharable experience.

Both weapon (whether actual or imagined) and wound (whether actual or imagined) may be used associatively to express pain. To some extent the inner workings of the two metaphors, as well as the perceptual complications that attend their use, overlap because the second (bodily damage) sometimes occurs as a version of the first (agency). The feeling of pain entails the feeling of being acted upon, and the person may either express this in terms of the world acting on him ("It feels like a knife . . .") or in terms of his own body acting on him ("It feels like the bones are cutting through . . ."). Thus, though the phrase "language of agency" refers primarily to the image of the weapon, its meaning also extends to the image of the wound. Ordinarily, however, the metaphor of bodily damage also entails a wholly distinct set of perceptual complications; and these complications, as well as the ways in which they get sorted out by culture, will require a separate treatment and be dealt with in a later work.

As an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain; as a perceptual fact, it can lift pain and its attributes out of the body and make them visible. The mental habit of *recognizing* pain in the weapon (despite the fact that an inanimate object cannot "have pain" or any other sentient experience) is both an ancient and an enduring one. Thus Homer speaks of an arrow "freighted with dark pains," as though the heavy hurt the arrow will cause is already visibly contained in and carried by the object—is palpably there as its weight and cargo.<sup>12</sup> Margery Kempe, the fourteenth-century mystic, speaks of a "boisterous nail," as though not only the pain that can be produced by the nail but the noises and cries in turn produced by the person in pain are already audible in the nail itself.<sup>13</sup> It is in the spirit of the same observation that Wittgenstein asks whether we ought not to be able to speak of the stone that causes hurt as having "pain patches" on it.<sup>14</sup> And the implications of the observation are extended in Joseph Beuys's small sculpture of a knife blade bound in gauze, exhibited at the Guggenheim in 1979 and entitled, "When you cut your finger, bandage the knife."

The point here is not just that pain can be apprehended in the image of the weapon (or wound) but that it almost cannot be apprehended without it: few people would have difficulty understanding Michael Walzer's troubled statement, "I cannot conceptualize infinite pain without thinking of whips and scorpions, hot irons and other people";<sup>15</sup> and the fact that the very word "pain" has its etymological home in "*poena*" or "punishment" reminds us that even the elementary act of naming this most interior of events entails an immediate mental somersault out of the body into the external social circumstances that can be pictured as having caused the hurt.

Given the expressive potential of the language of agency, it is not surprising that it reappears continually in the words of those working to objectify and

eliminate pain. Many of the elementary adjectives listed on the McGill Pain Questionnaire (e.g., burning, stabbing, drilling, pinching, gnawing) are embedded forms of this language since, as Melzack's own account makes clear, a patient may characterize the pain in her arm as "burning" or instead say "It feels as if my arm's on fire," may characterize the pain behind his eyes as "drilling" or instead say "It feels as though a drill. . . ." (Some forms of pain therapy explicitly invite the patient to conceptualize a weapon or object inside the body and then mentally push it out—a process that has precedents in much older remedies that often entailed a shaman or doctor mimetically "pulling" the pain out of the body with some appropriately shaped object.) Medical researchers also use agency language in their descriptions and maps of physiological mechanisms: the term "*trigger points*" (used to indicate the bodily points where pain usually originates or the paths along which it spreads) is an instance.

Those working within the nonmedical contexts described earlier—Amnesty International, the law, art—also show this same awareness of the expressive potential of the sign of the weapon: thus Amnesty International realized they would be able to enlist the help of men and women in many walks of life when a 1963 newspaper image of a torture weapon elicited from the public an immediate outcry against the human hurt visibly suggested by the object;<sup>16</sup> the sign of the weapon is repeatedly introduced into that section of the closing argument in a personal injury trial that is explicitly devoted to describing the plaintiff's "pain and suffering"; and Odysseus's original adeptness at wholly ignoring Philoctetes's pain is subverted by the intervening sign of the weapon, for he eventually "sees" Philoctetes's pain only because circumstances arise that require him to attend to—what else?—Philoctetes's bow.

This brief array of examples illustrates the benign potential of the language of agency, its invocation by those who wish to express their own pain (Melzack's patients), to express someone else's pain (Amnesty, Sophocles), or to imagine other people's pain (Walzer); and a detailed examination of any one of these uses would confirm the critically important point stressed earlier, that in order to express pain one must both objectify its felt-characteristics and hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics. That is, the image of the weapon only enables us to see *the attributes* of pain if it is clear that the attributes we are seeing are the attributes of *pain* (and not of something else). The deeply problematic character of this language, its inherent instability, arises precisely because it permits a break in the identification of the referent and thus a misidentification of the thing to which the attributes belong. While the advantage of the sign is its proximity to the body, its disadvantage is the ease with which it can then be spatially separated from the body.

Given the fact that actual weapons ordinarily hurt rather than heal persons, it would be surprising if the iconography of weapons ordinarily worked to assist those in pain, and of course it does not. When, for example, the language of

agency enters political discourse, its use is often very far removed from the one just summarized, as the following unpleasant examples suggest: it is said that Richard Nixon's favorite saying whenever he had triumphed over and therefore discomfited a journalist was, "That really flicks the scab off";<sup>17</sup> George Wallace once spoke of wanting to give his political enemy a "barbed-wire enema" (and when publically called on to apologize for his statement, he appeared to believe its scatology rather than its cruelty was the problem);<sup>18</sup> the language of agency is again recognizable in Lyndon Johnson's verbal habit during the Vietnam period of describing a military or political victory as "nailing the coon skin to the wall"; and, in a startling confusion of the large with the small, Ronald Reagan complained of the Soviet reaction to the American decision to produce a neutron bomb by saying, "[The Russians] are squealing like they're sitting on a sharp nail."<sup>19</sup> It would be possible to debate for a long time the significance or insignificance of this language (for though clearly not innocent, the precise extent to which it is harmful is unclear). But what is both self-evident and undebatable is this: whatever these sentences express, what they do not express is physical pain. In none of the four does the sign of the weapon work to bestow visibility on the aversiveness of physical suffering, and in none of the four does the speaker invoke that sign in order to direct sympathetic attention to the felt-experience of the person pictured as acted upon by the object.

It will eventually become apparent that the particular perceptual confusion sponsored by the language of agency is the conflation of pain with power. For now, it is enough to notice that the mere appearance of the sign of a weapon in a spoken sentence, a written paragraph, or a visual image (e.g., the litany of weapons in the writings of Sade; their occasional presence in a fashion photograph or painting) does not mean that there has been any attempt to present pain and, on the contrary, often means that the nature of pain has just been pushed into deeper obscurity.

The negative use of the language of agency, only fleetingly suggested here, will in the opening chapter be shown not as it occurs in isolated sentences but as it enters into the structure of larger events where it achieves the full extremity of its sadistic potential. In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power. The sign of the weapon will again be attended to in the second chapter, for the perceptual confusion sponsored by the sign increases the difficulty of accurately identifying the function of injuring in war (and thus increases also the difficulty of identifying the precise character of the action that could plausibly be used in its place).

As the language of agency has a central place in torture and war—the two events in which the ordinary assumptions of culture are suspended—so, conversely, the basic structures of culture are centrally devoted to stabilizing this

sign.] The discussion of civilization's ongoing modifications of "agency" in the second half of the book (Part Two: Chapters 3–5) is sometimes framed explicitly in terms of changes in verbal or visual *iconography* (e.g., the sign of the cross; the signs on the flags of nations), at other times is framed in terms of the restructuring not of the icon or image but of the *actual object* (e.g., the modifications in the form of the weapon that allow it to become transformed into a tool or into an artifact), and at still other times is framed in terms of the human *actions* associated with such objects (e.g., the elaborate mental labor of dissociating "wounding" from "creating" in the Hebrew scriptures). The idiom of this last sentence—"tool," "artifact," "restructure," "creating"—calls attention to the fact that there is a third subject in this book that has so far not been introduced.

### The Nature of Human Creation

We have seen that physical pain is difficult to express, and that this inexpressibility has political consequences; but we will also see that those political consequences—by making overt precisely what is at stake in "inexpressibility"—begin to expose by inversion the essential character of "expressibility," whether verbal or material. Thus as our first subject led to a second, so the second leads just as inevitably to a third: the nature of human creation.

What it is to "uncreate" and what it is to create eventually become central preoccupations of this book, as the overarching two-part division—*Unmaking* and *Making*—suggests. The way in which the material in the first half necessitates attention to the problem of creation addressed in the second can be briefly indicated here by first identifying in skeletal outline the central argument about torture and war, and then identifying what within the argument carries with it the requirement that "making" itself become better understood.

Based on the verbal accounts of people who were political prisoners during the 1970s, Chapter 1 shows that torture has a structure that is as narrow and consistent as its geographical incidence is widespread. That structure entails the simultaneous and inseparable occurrence of three events which if described sequentially would occur in the following order: first, the infliction of physical pain; second, the objectification of the eight central attributes of pain; and third, the translation of those attributes into the insignia of the regime.

The work of the opening chapter is only to identify and make manifest this three-part structure. But an example of the objectification and appropriation of *any one* of pain's attributes also begins to make it clear why the book at a much later point turns of necessity to the subject of creating. Physical pain—to invoke what is at this moment its single most familiar attribute—is language-destroying. Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also