

that are induced –like that of torture for instance– and that I know Ferber has been dealing with these questions from different angles (cf. Ferber 2016), my questions are just trying to explore the connections she sees between this book and these other sides of her work, and whether a meditation on pain and language can also take us further on the possibilities of restoring community even in the face –or in the midst of the resonating, deafening sounds– of violence.

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Response of the author

Let me begin by thanking María del Rosario Acosta for her careful and thoughtful reading of *Language Pangs: On Pain and the Origin of Language*. Her comments touch on the heart of the book's main arguments, but at the same time offer a fresh viewpoint on what I

would call its moral implications. Since most of the book consists of close readings of Herder, Heidegger, and Sophocles, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of its core, namely, the relationship between language and pain that I think, in a broad sense, is ultimately a question about suffering and its relation, on the one hand to expression, and on the other, to a sense of a community. These are the issues that stand at the center of Acosta's evocative response. Before I respond to her interpretation of the book in detail, however, let me say a few words of introduction about the book.²

Whether an all-consuming agony induced by violence or a mere passing headache, we have all experienced pain in one way or another and we all have some basic intuitions about it. We seem to know the suffering inherent to pain at first hand, we have felt its constraints and have all, to some extent, been lost for words in the face of its intensity. Pain seems to violently invade us with its invincible force, soon becoming the exclusive focus of our being. Pain becomes, almost unnoticeably, inseparable from us as it isolates us. But beyond the violence it exercises on our bodies and our souls, the experience of pain is also unique in its ability to interrupt, even block, our language. We tend to think of pain as an experience that cannot be fully expressed in language, something we can never entirely communicate or share with others. The experience of pain therefore fundamentally challenges our trust in language and its ability to express and

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2 My introduction is largely based on the first chapter of the book (cf. Ferber 2019 1-23).

communicate. This subversion of language does not only occur in the gap between the sufferer's own feeling and words; it seems to institute a deep, unbridgeable divide between sufferer and world. This is why it appears to us that we always suffer alone: the totality with which pain isolates us is not only singular insofar as it encapsulates us; it also uniquely reconstitutes, perhaps even re-creates, the foundations of our relationship to everything else: self, body, world, and language. These intuitions we have about the experience of pain are interestingly reflected in two assumptions prevalent in the literature about pain. According to the first paradigm, pain is fundamentally characterized by its *destructiveness*; according to the second, pain is violently *isolating*, turning us into enclosed, solipsistic entities.

When we reflect on the two aforementioned paradigms, as they take apart pain into its destructive and isolating components, it is important to bear in mind that the understanding of pain these two paradigms yield is not only characterized by each trait separately, but also suggests something about an inseparability between them. For it is due to its fiercely destructive effect on our bodies as well as our language that pain isolates us, leaving us encapsulated in its non-linguistic, solipsistic realm. The two paradigms not only originate in the experience of pain, but they also fuel one another: there is no isolation without destruction, and vice versa. Moreover, this interdependency between the paradigms of pain is established via pain's relations with language. In other words, any account of pain as destructive or isolating, even when it does not

explicitly discuss language, necessarily implies a strong and incontestable linguistic presence. This paradigmatic account of pain subsequently results in a resolute separation between language and the experience of pain.

Language Pangs challenges these familiar conceptions of dissociation and mutual exclusion, as well as a reconsideration of the relationship between pain and language in terms of an essential interconnectedness. The premise of the book is both that we cannot truly penetrate the experience of pain without taking account of its relation to language; and also that the nature of language essentially depends on our understanding of its relationship with pain. I question the assumption that the experience of pain limits our linguistic abilities, neutralizing us as linguistic beings. On the contrary, the exploration of the nature and origins of language reveals a very strong kinship to pain. It is therefore necessary to shift away from characterizing this relationship in terms of essential rivalry and opposition and turn toward a notion of inherent interconnection and profound intimacy between pain and language – an abiding intimacy. Although it might be irrefutable that, in states of extreme pain, language seems to crumble or collapse, depriving us of words, treating such experiences as paradigmatic is problematic and partial, distorting the way that pain and language are conceptualized and defined in the first place.

The book approaches these questions through the lens of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of language* (1772) being, as I take it, the first philosophical account to bring together language and pain by establishing the cry

of pain as nothing less than the origin of language. Herder not only emphasizes the cry of pain but also the important role of hearing; both cry and hearing constitute the beginning of language creating a space where pain is not an independent pre-linguistic event or content, but rather takes part in language's very substratum. Consequently, the origin of language is, according to Herder, not about speech, communication, or mediation (as the contemporaneous Enlightenment theories would have it); but rather, about pain's immediate expression in a cry and the immediacy with which we hear and feel the pain of others. With these arguments, Herder provides a consequential challenge to theories of pain whose focus is the unbridgeable gap between our feeling and knowledge of our own pain and the pain of others.³

In her commentary, Acosta is asking "how far we want to go in insisting on these experiences to be the place where we actually locate the *origin* of language?" According to her, by locating my discussion of pain in the context of Herder's account of the origin of language, I in fact suggest that

as singular as these experiences [of pain] may be, they will become universal –universal to the extent that, in opening up another possibility of conceiving language altogether, they become the basis of a theory of language that needs then to go beyond these singularities to explain what language is as such.

3 There are two other figures central to the book and to my discussion of these issues: Martin Heidegger to whom chapter 4 is devoted, and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, which is the center of chapter 5.

This is a problem that arises when we take into account her own work, namely, pain that is not only about the universal, shared forms of our existence –linguistic or otherwise– but rather, about the most extreme limits of everything imaginable –not only suffering itself, but also the violent circumstances that brought it about–. In this context, Acosta problematizes the encounter between the singular character of the experience of suffering and the philosophical demand to think of it in universal terms (otherwise, our discussion will be limited to the psychological account of suffering and its implications). As she puts it: "How to insist on the demand of communicability and share-ability (going to the literal meaning of *Mitteilbarkeit* in German) without operating already under the assumption of turning what is communicable into a universal or at least universalizable experience?"

My response to this important question has to do, in many ways, with my understanding and reading of Herder. As mentioned above, although most of the book is devoted to close readings of Herder and his resonance in Heidegger or Sophocles, the book is not *about* him. It is about the experience of pain and its effect on language. I say my "understanding" of Herder precisely *because* I am not, strictly speaking, a Herder scholar, that I believe I can identify arguments in his work whose implications lie much further than being those of an eighteenth-century thinker (however radical). Although Herder tries to write on something as "universal" as language, he actually touches on what is most singular. Moreover, perhaps it is this singularity that serves as basis to

our ability to think the universal and not the other way around, as we are accustomed to thinking. This is how bodily pain comes to be the birth of language: the singular and extreme is the only thing that can serve as the beginning of the universal. The utmost, shattering privacy, becomes something we all share. Taking this from Herder into the context of Acosta's work with Colombia's Historical Memory Center, and her current work now with survivors of police torture in Chicago, I would say that the importance of this project has to do not only with the collection of testimonies from individuals who have suffered the greatest of pains, but also with the philosophical significance of the structure of suffering and its implications. This is where the singular comes together with the universal in a striking manner.

I think that this is what brings the book very close to Acosta's work. If those cases of terrible, unimaginable violence and suffering were only extreme cases, that is, cases that do not reflect what we share as human beings, they would not have been so important. This is, indeed, the very philosophical force extreme pain has, so I believe. In Acosta's work as well as in my own, the extreme draws together, the singular shapes the universal. (I would like to add here that there is one crucial difference between her work on trauma and memory and my own work on pain: in the case of victims of violence, there is a fundamental presence of a perpetrator (regardless the question whether or not he or she are identified). Namely, the problem of the infliction of pain by the other is essential. In my work on pain the role of the perpetrator is minor and appears only in my discussion of the figure of

Philoctetes from the Sophoclean drama of the same name (see also the last part of Acosta's response).

We could say, and here I continue to address more points Acosta raises, that pain and violence constitute a community and that listening to the pains of others bring us close to them, thereby constituting a shared space. That even though we can never truly 'understand' the pain of other (as Elaine Scarry has famously argued) we could still be empathetic towards it, turn toward the suffering other. This is all true, but from my perspective, not enough.⁴ I would say that the communal element here, what we can call the "universal", has to do with what pain exposes not only in its victim, but in us. By listening we not only place ourselves beside the sufferer, caress her and try to help by (at least) empathizing. I would like to suggest something more far reaching, that again, I think is present in both our works: namely, that the pain of others is always-also our own pain, namely, that it belongs to a world we share and thus that we are responsible for it (otherwise my project would remain within the boundaries of psychology and not have philosophical significance).

Acosta addresses such implication of the experience of suffering on our being with others, in her writings on Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of the "inoperative community" (cf. Acosta 2017). The community is made out of finite individuals surrounded by their own limits, and since "the fulfillment of individuality is,

4 Elaine Scarry's prominent *The Body in Pain* (1985), plays a significant role in the crystallization of the two paradigms. See my criticism of Scarry in *Language Pangs*, especially pp. 8-11.

precisely, the negation of community and relation altogether”, the community is doomed to inoperativeness (*id.* 24). Here, Acosta emphasizes Nancy’s important idea of community not as a space to be regained or lost but rather as what “is given to us with being and as being” (*id.* 35). In this context, Acosta discusses the “law” of the community (developed through her reading of Kant), and its relation to the innermost structure of our being with others. She argues that community is established on a demand, however, without being able to command (it would be interesting to think of Heidegger’s “Call of conscience” here (*cf.* Ferber 2019 111-116)). There are different ways to understand this argument, I would here suggest one: community has to do with the “task” of hearing the summoning of communal life, and this is in the context of my own work in cases of the expression of suffering.

This relates to one of the most important arguments of the book, that has to do with what we take to be the destructive nature of pain. If we consider the experience of pain solely from the perspective of those who are suffering, we may be left with broken words and the collapse of our communicative capabilities. But the problematics inherent to the encounter between pain and language extend beyond the sufferer’s own body or speech, pertaining equally to those who witness the suffering of others. We all –not only those in pain– bear responsibility for the inexpressibility of pain. Every broken cry calls upon us, demands something from us, and has the potential to move us (here, Nancy’s demand rather than command is suggestive). This is another one of pain’s distinct attributes: even when not spoken

clearly or accurately defined, even when cried or moaned with the faintest breath, pain permeates us, stakes a claim on us –not only on those who suffer, but most of all, on those who do not–.

In my work on Jean Améry (*cf.* Ferber 2016), this claim plays an important role. One of my challenges there is to show that, precisely because Améry insists on the solitude forced on him by the violence he has suffered, he cannot avoid speaking about a “world” –the world is open or closed to him, the world is familiar but still alien, and finally, his famous phrase that he will never again ‘feel at home in the world’–. What I am interested in here (besides the important relation to Heidegger’s being-in-the-world), is the fact that insofar as it is a *world* that we are speaking of (and it is always about a world), it is one shared with us. It is not only Améry’s space of suffering. In that sense, we take part in his pain –but in the strong sense, we are actually in pain–. Even if this pain is not inflicted on our bodies, we share the same world where these events have happened (and I think that here *Language Pangs* comes very close to Acosta’s work).

It is interesting to note here that for Herder, the sphere where this primordial sympathy appears is that of nature rather than an intersubjective human realm. This idea corresponds directly with Acosta’s work on Schiller, specifically her reading of his *Aesthetic Letters*, where Schiller asks “How can we, however laudable our precepts, how can we be just, kindly, and human toward others, if we lack *the power of receiving into ourselves, faithfully and truly, natures unlike ours, of feeling our way into the situation of others, of making other people’s feelings*

our own?” (cit. Acosta 2011 193, emphasis added). About this she says:

This is the same notion of sympathy or compassion [*Mitleid*] – a kind of ‘feeling with others’ – that will be carefully developed two years later in relation to the notion of the ‘pathetic sublime’. Schiller will show then how it is only through our relationship to another human being’s suffering, that is, how it is only in ‘making other people’s feelings our own,’ that we first discover our own ultimate possibility: our power to be free. (*id.* 194)

The importance of Acosta’s emphasis is double. First, for Schiller, just like in Herder, “feeling-with” has to do with the encounter between man and nature, rather than between two subjects. Second, and more importantly, Acosta establishes a link between “feeling-with” and freedom, namely, the sympathy with the pain of others, that marks not only a kind of moral conduct, but foremost, something of our own freedom as singular human beings.

And perhaps it is pain that has the unique role of creating such a space for us, a shared space. This is also related to another of Acosta’s questions, particularly, the problem of the fundamental shattering not only of our bodies and language, but also “a shattering of meaning altogether: in the face of trauma, the world has stopped making sense”. This is something Acosta emphasizes in her response – and rightly so. It is important because “making sense” does not happen immediately for its own sake. It is always about a relation. Cases of extreme pain caused by violence are important precisely because there is no possibility of maintaining a relation at all (if we allude to

Heidegger again, it would be something like what he calls the “non-relational”), especially in the case of meaning. It is here, Acosta writes, that the world stops making sense. But, again, this is the world that we share with the victims. It is also our world that has now lost its meaning. This is, again, a central argument in my work on Améry. Herder makes an interesting move in this context, he emphasizes sound, especially the “musical strings” metaphor. He does not merely describe a world where sounds resonate (touching or not the heart of another) but, more importantly, a world – a space that is created – constituted in the first place by these sounds. There is no space, no world, that is not a space of resonance (Acosta addresses this in the context of the question of expression).

This brings me to the last points Acosta raises when she elaborates on the sense of hearing, that stands at the center of the book (apart from Herder, also in the discussions of Heidegger and Sophocles).

More than our capacity to express pain, [she writes] it is actually our sense of hearing that brings us together, putting the ethical emphasis on the side of the listener, and presenting the groundwork of a community constituted in and by the act of being summoned rather than in the need to communicate.

This claim occupies a central role in Acosta’s current research on *Grammars of Listening*. There, Acosta uses the structure of listening as the substratum of trauma and its implications touching not only on the question of suffering and the sufferer, but also and foremost on the ethical role of listening to the pain of others. Insofar as the context of trauma is concerned, for

Acosta this is, first and foremost, a question of responsibility (cf. Acosta 2019).

This brings me back to *Language Pangs* and to Herder's treatise on language. For Herder, the origin of language is, contrary to our intuitions, not about speech at all, not communication or an expression aimed at the satisfaction of needs (as Locke, his predecessor, thought of it). Herder speaks of *hearing* as the moment of language's birth, namely, it is when we hear, when sound penetrates us, that we become linguistic beings. It is not about us, but about listening to others. However, for Herder such listening is a listening to the cry of pain –the sound suffering makes. This is why the relation between pain and language is not (or not only) about the ability or inability to speak our pains, to describe them–. But rather, the important, deep ways whither being able to hear one another constitutes our language, our world, and our ethical conduct. It is therefore not only the birth of language, but its birth pangs: thereby, *language pangs*.

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