

‘Incurable Sores on Innocent Tongues’:

The Language of Pain in World War I Poetry

LES “PLAIES INCURABLES SUR LES LANGUES INNOCENTES”:

LE LANGAGE DE LA DOULEUR DANS LA POÉSIE DE LA PREMIÈRE GUERRE MONDIALE

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Abstract: This paper adopts Elaine Scarry’s ideas about the unsharability of pain through its resistance to language, by which pain not only resists language but also actively destroys it, and that pain can only be effectively described when the human voice only become visible. Through close analysis of a representative sample of World War I verse, this article examines the mechanisms war poets used to express pain. It turns out that these poets reflected anxieties against the difficulty of expressing and communicating pain and adopted visualizing and ekphrastic mechanisms and suggestive symbols to overcome that difficulty, by which they have managed to share pain and communicate it. Their broken grammar and lines, as well as the shattered music of their verses, are in themselves prerequisites for the truthful communication of pain. As such, they provided a mechanism by which any painful experience may be communicated, thus posing as successful advocates of revolt against all sorts of silencing and blinding public awareness. They are protectors of vision and voice.

Key words: Language; Communication; Pain; World War I Poetry; Ekphrasis

Resumé Ce document adopte les idées d’Elaine Scarry sur la nature non partageable de la douleur à travers sa résistance à la langue. La douleur peut non seulement résister à la langue mais aussi la détruire activement. Et la douleur ne peut être efficacement décrite que lorsque la voix humaine devient visible. Grâce à une analyse approfondie d’un échantillon représentatif du verset de la Première Guerre mondiale, cet article examine les mécanismes des poètes de la guerre pour exprimer la douleur. Il s’avère que ces poètes ont reflété des angoisses contre la difficulté d’exprimer et la douleur de communiquer et ont adopté des mécanismes de visualisation, des mécanismes ekphrastiques et des symboles suggestifs pour surmonter cette difficulté par lequel ils ont réussi à partager la douleur et la communiquer. Leurs grammaire et lignes brisées, ainsi que la musique brisée de leurs vers, sont en eux-mêmes des conditions préalables à la communication véridique de la douleur. Du coup, ils ont fourni un mécanisme par lequel toute expérience douloureuse peut être communiquée, ce qui se pose comme les défenseurs de la révolte contre toutes sortes de silence et de sensibilisation aveuglante du public. Ils sont les protecteurs de la vision et la voix.

Mots-clés: Langue; Communication; Douleur; Poésie De La Première Guerre Mondiale; Ekphrastique

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Perhaps far beyond many conflicts, World War I inspired many poets to compose verse celebrating or protesting against it. Socially, World War I was welcomed enthusiastically by most, if not all, sections of the society. Marc Ferro argued that at a time when social unrest was dominant, which brought many people closer to such movements as communism and socialism, the war was initially conceived as a 'liberator' and, hence, when the war was declared it provided a substitute to the people's revolutionary hopes and millions volunteered before conscription was introduced, particularly that the war was promoted as a religious crusade (3, 8, 180). There were different motives beyond the initial enthusiastic acceptance of the war. Because the war came at a time when at least one third of Britain's population lived "in chronic poverty, unable to sustain the primal needs of animal life," the underprivileged classes hoped that it might bring social injustice to an end (Tuchman, 356). The leisured classes welcomed it because "the war seemed a release from boredom, an invitation for heroism, a remedy for decadence," in light of a dominant sense of "war psychosis" (Gay, 14). Of course, "the war, as seen by young officers of privileged background, is likely to be a picture defined by the social shaping of these men. Julian Grenfell's war was never likely to be Isaac Rosenberg's" (Parfitt, 14). Dominic Hibberd's claim that during the war a general interest in pro-war 'national' poets "made serious criticism almost impossible, and the more responsible critics felt obliged to hold their peace", might provide a compelling explanation for the neglect of anti-war poets and poetry which was anything but heroic propaganda for the war (13; see also Liddiard, 249). Joseph Cohen attached the war psychosis to society's prevailing archetypal attitude of 'hero-worship' (26; see also Onions, 20-23).²

With the actual details of trench warfare coming home, the Great War inflicted a psychic chasm between traditional ideals of 'heroism', 'glory', 'sacrifice', 'crusades', nationalism, magnanimity, and prowess in the early phases of the war, and such realistic arguments as war being a defence of no-man's-land, unnecessary suffering, false and un-heroic religious crusade, during the later stages of the conflict. As Jay Winter argued, the initial "patriotic appeals derived from the fact that they were distilled from a set of what may be called 'traditional values'- classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas widely disseminated in both elite and popular culture before and during the war" (3). The war, horrible as it was, placed greater emphasis on issues of life and death, rather than literature and poetry; hence Wilfred Owen, in his most celebrated statement, asserted that his subject was the pity and how "poetry is in the pity" (Owen, *Preface*; see also Johnston, 163-164). Consequently, the myth of the war, which the propaganda fomented, began to disappear in the later stages of the conflict, to which the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, and Isaac Rosenberg belongs. Their poetry incorporates an attitude based on bringing "'the aesthetics of direct experience' to bear on the act of imagining the war, in a way far removed from the 'lies', or 'Big Words' of the older generation who sent them to fight and die in France and Flanders" (Winter, 2). The poems of Sassoon and Owen have nothing of the romantic portrayals of the war that belong to Georgian fantasy and idealism, with their poetry simply, in Johnston's words, functioning "as conscience, voice of anger and pain" (19). Sassoon, Thomas, Owen, and Rosenberg wrote about the terrible experience of war which left its thumbprint on their thinking, imagination, and verse. Many of them suffered from shellshock caused by imminent danger and exposure to horrible scenes of mutilation, brutality, and atrocities. However, they found it difficult to communicate the pain of those experiences, a matter that they struggled to render in words.

Elaine Scarry has wittingly discussed the difficulty of expressing pain - physical or mental - in language, because pain is characterised by its "unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language"; that is, pain's resistance to language is "essential to what it [pain] is", because "pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language" (4, 5) Scarry thus argues that "a great deal, then, is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach to accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language" (6). The task of bringing a language that would express others' pain and distress, as in the case of the poet, is even more difficult (Scarry, 6). Scarry has commented on the struggle to invent a language that can effectively describe pain, finding that such language materialises when "the human voice only become visible" (8). Thus, through a representative sample of the verse of the pre-mentioned poets, amongst others, this paper examines the mechanisms these poets used to express pain, a human experience that challenges language.

Though initially interested in the war for which he enlisted enthusiastically, Sassoon lost that enthusiasm in due course and protested against the war. In "The Troops", he speaks of soldiers doomed to die whilst vainly clinging to life; they are "disconsolate men" with "dulled, sunken faces." They "cling to life with stubborn hands" and manage to "grin through storms of death and find a gap/ In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defense". As such, Sassoon translates the aching experience of the soldiers into expressive gestures and images, the clinging and the stubborn hands, along with the act of grinning, altogether evoking visually the painful experience these men passed through; dejection is painted on the faces, themselves blunted, submerged, and depressed within what the imaginative presentation turns into a deep ocean of sorrow and futility. No wonder then, the landscape itself assumes a visual capacity for rendering threat, indifference, and pain:

They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy

² But on the official level, at least, the war seemed an outlet for social outrage, providing a means to avoid social clashes by containing the social problems and channelling them toward an outside enemy, again at a time when socialism was active and strikes reached a high level (1000 strikes took place between January and July 1914). Social and political problems were prevalent: the Irish question and the Suffragette movement were also beginning to press the British state (Parfitt, 2-3; Da Sola Pinto, 130).

Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all
Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
That hastens over them where they endure
Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom. (L. 12-17)

These men are undergoing some sort of a subterranean journey into earthquake-stricken-like landscape under a gloomy celestial setting. The detonated landscape is juxtaposed to an apathetic *heaven* that seems to be like wandering enemy jets that bombard and ruin all that is underneath. Nonetheless, the speechless experience is communicated through a distinctive poetic discourse, based on visualizing of and association with objects and acts emblematic of pain.

Sassoon is preoccupied with the inflicted, unavoidable painful experience of the soldiers who “Flock silently away” and whose sacrifices are neither witnessed nor recalled. He revolts against absencing and silencing soldiers as well as overlooking painful experiences which he documents in “They”:

‘We’re none of us the same!’ the boys reply.
‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert’s gone syphilitic; you’ll not find
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change’. (L. 7-12)

Sassoon once again resorts to painterly discourse, capable of creating images of the described in the minds of the readers, to offer his case, that of reporting and revealing the pain of the combatants. The underlying movement of the verse is suggestive of a journey to be taken by the reader, the vigilant one, amongst sites of torment and devastation; ‘you’ll not find’ assumes a person moving and searching; the reader may also witness the act of shooting Poor Jim and see the bullet going *through* his lungs. Contrary to the enabled reader, the soldiers can not walk, see, breathe, nor think. Sassoon’s painterly discourse incorporates lexicon reflecting his attention to visual detail: body, touch, position, and shape.

Similar patterns of pain and related techniques of communicating such patterns are also evident in the poetry of Edward Thomas, who was mostly known for his prose, before composing poetry (being encouraged to do so by Robert Frost); in his poetry he expressed “tensions related to aspects of his marriage, his poverty, and the War” (Hunter, 68). In “As the Team’s Head-Brass”, Thomas recruits a shocking image of a *wrecked*, depressing, and indifferent landscape that evokes feelings of estrangement: “among the boughs of a fallen elm/That strewed the angle of the fallow”. This comes along with the poet’s emphasis on the notion of vision or ‘seeing’ “If we could see” (34). The persona expresses concern about the possibility the he might “spare an arm. I shouldn’t want to lose/ A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so” (ll.21-22). These concerns seem silent, incapable of translating the pain they entail and hence Thomas introduces a pain-rendering vision; the persona “watched the clods crumble and topple over” along with horses that could but did not “tread[ing] me down” and, instead, were “Scraping” and “screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed/ Once more.” The lines turn out to be ways of rendering the scene the soldiers “watch”. With such an ekphrastic technique, which goes beyond mere visual representation, the actual experience delineated in the poem may *flash once more* in the reader’s mind.

The poet’s challenged ability to render the horror of the war is, hence, an essential aspect of an anxiety which lurks underneath the surface of his verse, sometimes clear, others suggested. As Stan Smith noted, “Landscape and language are repeatedly linked in Thomas’s thought;” Thomas wrote verse in which he pursued “an exploration of this subtle language of the sense, in which a deeper estrangement and intimacy are *ambiguously* inscribed,” this ambiguity perhaps the poet’s attempt to give utterance to the enigmatic, seemingly unspeakable experience of pain and sorrow, particularly that the difficulty of finding the required expression is a recurrent anxiety in Thomas’s verse, as well as in the verse of his fellow war poets (*italics mine*, 52, 53). As Thomas asserts in “Old Man”:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember

The key to memory and recall is essentially the ability to remember loud and live in verse; that is, the visual and audible expression by which the poet can communicate the experience of pain. This is what Smith finds at the heart of Thomas’s “Words”, where the poet is found “exploring the simultaneous plentitude and lack at the heart of language” (58). Such anxiety is definitely evident in another very successful pain-translating poem of Thomas, “Digging”:

What matter makes my spade for tears or mirth,
Letting down two clay pipes into the earth?

The one I smoked, the other a soldier
Of Blenheim, Ramillies, and Malplaquet
Perhaps. The dead man's immortality
Lies represented lightly with my own,
A yard or two nearer the living air
Than bones of ancients who, amazed to see
Almighty God erect the mastodon,
Once laughed, or wept, in this same light of day.

Writing poetry is as difficult as digging, where one may bury the dead and find bones of the earlier dead, reflecting on the futility of man's life and of war itself, a long with an ironic gesture against religious discourse, perhaps the use of religion to promote the fighting at the beginning of World War I as a religious crusade.

Nonetheless, the act of digging, which is associated with spades and shovels, is emblematic of pain. As Scarry puts it:

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. (15)

These lines became inspirational for a World War II poet, Seamus Heaney, whose poem of the same title incorporates the employment of images of 'digging' parallel to writing, the pen turning into a spade and a gun: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests; snug as a gun;" and "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it." Such are acts that hint at the painful vocation of the war poet, who is supposed to unearth the truth of the war and dig into its politics, before burying/covering it in the underlying texture of his verse. Perhaps one can argue a possible connection between the writing of poetry and farming here, notwithstanding the discourse of discovery and exploration that pervaded the language of the time.

However, the discourse of danger, detonation, pain, and death is the one that took the lead in the poetry of the war. Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et decorum est" is haunted by such discourse, but within a distinctive interest in successful communication of the terrible experience of trench fighting:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime. -
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

By the intermingling of direct communication with the soldiers and narrative address towards the reader, Owen creates live transmission of the experience of war. The poet initiates a dramatic style, where the events seem to take place as one reads them. The reader is even alerted to the gas bombs, just like the soldiers in the poem. Chemicals are smelled and helmets placed on heads in what seems to the reader a personal firsthand experience, along with a carefully created leading atmosphere, sound-wise and vision-wise: the yelling and stumbling of an undetermined soldier who is to be imagined/envisioned "floundering like a man in fire or lime" within a color, shade, position, and shape determined background, to rest finally in an image of him drowning into the sea. In fact, a clear awareness of painterly discourse is marked by the arrangement of the images or scenes for, as in painting, the sea can not be positioned at the center and should rather be placed at either end, hence ending the stanza. The color of the sea hints at the nature of the explosive shells which release poison gas and which were used for the first time 1915; in particular, chlorine, a greenish-yellow gas, can be made from, among other things, sea-water. It's strong-smelling and very poisonous, and if inhaled melts and burns the nose, throat and lungs. Once again, Owen, just like many of his fellow war poets, takes on his shoulders the duty of translating the reality of trench warfare, when the soldiers themselves were not allowed to tell that truth, or perhaps dead or even crippled and therefore incapable of doing so. Owen is thus aware "Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues".³

³ A similar reference to chemical weapons occurs in Rosenberg's "Marching (as Seen from the Left File)" where the soldiers' hands "Swing across the khaki -/ Mustard-coloured khaki" (lines 5-6); the word 'mustard' alludes to the 'mustard gas' - (CH₂CH₂CL)₂S, a chemical that burned and blistered the skin - first used in the World War I.

In "Disabled", Owen begins by visually presenting the disability: "He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,/ And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,/ Legless, sewn short at elbow." But this disability casts its shadows on Owen's mentality as it is redirected towards the visualizing capacity of language:

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race,
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.
One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,
After the matches carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join. He wonders why...
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts

There should be no question that painterly and visual technique is at stake. Owen declares that it is essential to paint the figures and the actions of the war, a very difficult act indeed, for it is doomed for failure. This failure is attached to *static* painting which freezes the moment in a picture that later represents a dead moment, a matter clarified in Roland Barthes's notion of the phenomenology of the (dead) painting or picture as an allegory of the tomb, by which the memory inherent in the pictures becomes, rather than memory, an act of mourning, that which Barthes called "flat death" (in Haverkamp 259), by which the painted and photographed comes to generate nostalgia for a lost past and assert its loss. The photograph, according to Barthes, creates a paradoxical reality: "it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*"; that is, "an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*" (1977, 44). In other words, paintings and photographs lack the temporal aspect or, the so-called 'contingency', which pertains to a distinction between the emotionally detached, mechanical, and technical taking of the picture as opposed to the emotional attachment of the spectator seeing it, or even, the reader of an ekphrastic poem where the experience is rendered, though verbally, live as a firsthand experience. Taking pictures is hence considered a *mummification of corpses* (Bazin 9; Burgin 84). On the other hand, mental images, characteristic of literary pictorialism, are superior to photography, for the latter keeps appearances, while the earlier invokes essences. Such a shortcoming of static art is that which Owen's soldiers reject as they complain against the 'silly artist'. Live-painting in the language of verse, where the experience is lived and relived time and again, every time it is read, is a more successful means of *truthful* and effective communication.

Owen's complain of sore tongues is also evident in Rosenberg's verse, for he was the most troubled and preoccupied with pained and frenzied mouths, tongues, and utterances. His poems are dominated by symbolic images of 'voices' and 'sounds', in association with 'faces' and 'mouths'. In "Home-Thoughts from France" he refers to "fragile faces" and "pitiful mouths", along with "faces startled and shaken" (lines 2; 9). In "Daughters of War" the soldier has a "doomed mouth", in "Dead Man's Dump" "Their shut mouths made no moan" (line 9), and in "Dawn behind Night" he complains against "Lips! bold, frenzied utterance" (line 1). The voice of the horrified and distressed poet, however, is at once silent and revolutionary:

The voice that once could mirror
Remote depths
Of moving being,
Stirred by responsive voices near,
Suddenly stilled for ever. ("In War" lines 11-15)

Opposed to this 'suddenly stilled' voice, Rosenberg's responsive voice attempts "To reach the living word" (line 65). Such heavy emphasis on the facial and the vocal is essentially significant in Rosenberg's war poems; it is in line with his attempt to translate pain and horror into a graspable human discourse, by which the 'voice' becomes emblematic of the poet's creation of a language that uncovers the painful essences of experiences that leave their scars on the mouth and face of the poet: "men's feet/ Are on your face" (lines 9-10); and the "great lifted face" ("Daughters of War", line 4). In fact, this heavy emphasis on faces, as well as on mouths, nostrils etc, underlines a visualizing attitude that is necessary in the linguistic translation of unspeakable pain. As Scarry puts it:

Hearing and touch are objects outside the boundaries of the body... This objectlessness, the complete absence of referential content, almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal. But it is also its objectlessness that may give rise to imagining. (161-162)

That is, faces are painted by mouths, language posing as the means by which the poet is to communicate the actual experience of the war.

Nonetheless, the difficulty of resisting the disillusionment of war was persistent, as is evident in "Chagrin", where Rosenberg feels: "Caught still as Absalom,/ .../ Like hair of Absalom/ Caught and hanging still" (Lines 1-4). Rosenberg here employs the Biblical story of the death of Absalom, who was fleeing on his mule when his hair was caught in overhanging thick branches of a great oak tree; as his mule ran on, Absalom was left dangling alive in the air. (II Samuel: 18, 7-17). The story of David's son, hanging in the air, is used to reveal the poet's struggle to express in words and ideas the reality of the conflict. Thus, the poet's thoughts are as hindered as Absalom: "Of mute chagrin, my thoughts/ Hang like branch-clung hair/ To trunks of silence swing" (Lines 8-10). In a letter to Marsh in 1917, Rosenberg complained against the helplessness of language: "Now when my things fail to be clear I am sure it is because of the luckless choice of a word that would flash my idea plain as it is to my mind" (CW, 260). In his verse, Rosenberg managed to present clearly his idea of the pain of the war so clearly and skilfully.

The difficulty of putting the unseen into words is evident in Rosenberg's allegorical use of images of 'fingers'. In "Marching (as Seen From the Left File)" he refers to "Blind fingers" (line 14); in *Moses*, the need for a powerful expression:

...boils to my finger-tips,
Till my hand ache to grip
The hammer - the lone hammer
That breaks lives into a road
Through which my genius drives. (Lines 40-3)

The image of the hammer is central in expressing pain, as also in earlier images of the poet's pen as a spade or gun. The hammer is, perhaps, the poet's pen; consequently writing for him is as violent and tough - and even painful - as hammering. And one major aspect of hammering the silence over the pain of war lies in finding an expression that can communicate that experience live, which he successfully does in "Dead Man's Dump": "The wheels lurched over sprawled dead/ But pained them not, though their bones crunched,/ Their shut mouths made no moan" (Lines 7-9). It is too late for the 'sprawled dead' to respond (to moan); their bodies (bones) speak only when they are 'crunched' to powder.

Such repulsive images of destruction are also central in Rosenberg's landscapes. In "Home-Thoughts from France" the persona lives "In the land of ruin and woe" (line 7) and in "Break of Day in the Trenches" he speaks of "sardonic rat" with which he identifies: "Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew/ Your cosmopolitan sympathies." (lines 7-8). The rat represents the human degradation the war brought about; but once again, Rosenberg had encountered this - and the rodent - before the war. Bernard J. Verkamp argued that the use of animal imagery in describing conditions at war, as well as images of exhibition such as titles like 'the show' and 'exposure', represent the human degradation experienced at war (64). In Northrop Frye's terms, rather than an apocalyptic or pastoral symbol, the rat is a demonic creature which, surprisingly, appears familiar, thus, ironically representing the "transposition of human and animal roles that the trench scene has brought about," a transposition which encloses "images of terror - the opposite of pastoral emotions" (Fussel, 252). In "Dead Man's Dump" Rosenberg reports that "The wheels lurched over the sprawled dead" (line 7); the word 'sprawled' is a favourite of his since it recurs in "Break of Day in the Trenches" ("Sprawled in the bowels of the earth" line 17) and suggests massive inertia. His sense of subterranean dwelling dominates his war poems. These sprawled soldiers feature again in "Dead Man's Dump", where they are buried in Earth, a burial that has always been predestined for them:

Earth has waited for them
All the time of their growth
Fretting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!
In the strength of their strength
Suspended - stopped and held. (Lines 14-19)

In fact, it is evident in Rosenberg's poems that his mind was controlled by images of predetermination, of being 'doomed'. In addition to his images of "doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth" ("Dead Man's Dump", line 29), he also speaks of "doomed earth" and "doomed glee" ("Daughters of War", line 50). As such, Rosenberg's allegorical images of amputated bodies, crushed faces and bones, aching fingers, doomed speechless mouths, as well as shattered landscapes are essential to his struggle to 'essence' the war to his language.

All in all, these poets have complained against the difficulty of expressing and communicating pain, adopted visualizing and ekphrastic mechanisms and suggestive symbols to overcome that difficulty. They have managed to share

pain and communicate it and hence overcome what Scarry considered the unsharability of pain through its resistance to language. Their broken grammar and lines, as well as the shattered music of their verses, are in themselves prerequisites for the truthful communication of pain which, as Scarry outlined, not only resists language but also actively destroys it. Resorting to visualizing discourse is also another requirement in the communication of pain, since, as Scarry also asserted, pain can only be effectively described when the human voice only become visible. Thus, the poets examined here have all fulfilled the pattern required for their task of helping the distanced person to share that which is considered unsharable and inexpressible. In that regard, they have not only overcome the experience of pain but also pained those who wanted that experience to remain intangible and distanced from the public. They have also provided a mechanism by which any future painful experiences may be communicated, thus posing as successful advocates of revolt against all sorts of silencing and blinding public awareness. They are protectors of vision and voice.

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