Jesse Costantino

Book Report

2nd Dan test material

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. 385pp.

Elaine Scarry's study of the relationship between the "martial" and the "arts" traces the philosophical underpinnings of how these two socio-historical forces work together. Their point of connection, she claims, is the "body in pain"—both a literal and figurative site of the political forces uniting the "martial" and the "arts." While she spends very little time discussing what we might commonly think of as "martial arts" in its more familiar and everyday use, her study attempts to delve deeper into the ramifications of these terms' conjunction. Bringing the aesthetic realm (the artistic realm of imagining and expression) into the political realm (the militaristic realm of hierarchy and will) carries with it the potential for great good as well as great harm. For her, the inherent problem of expressing pain to another person lies at the heart of this potential. The inexpressibility of pain is, for her, the cause and the effect of how the "martial" and the "arts" understand one another.

Because her book is less expressly about any particular martial art, I intend to use much of this report as a way of explaining how her philosophical reading of the "martial" and the "arts" might pertain to our understanding of the martial arts in practice. I believe that as a discipline, the martial arts should develop a stronger sense of itself as a political expression as much as a physical and philosophical one. While this report certainly can't on its own do much of anything to change this fact, I hope that it suggests what that greater political awareness might look like. In prior reports and papers that I've submitted, I've made similar intellectual moves (understanding how the persistent consciousness of imagined "defeat" informs cultural representations of the martial arts, how representations of large-scale socio-cultural changes and the processes of modernization are reflected in the explosion of martial arts styles, and so on). This report will take that even further.

Scarry begins her book by discussing ways that pain has been described historically. She also details a few of the more modern and recent moves in the medical field toward finding an accurate language for expressing pain. For her, one of the prime components of pain is its verbalization—how it is spoken and written. While she uses medical examples and war-time examples, the concept has important applications to martial arts practice. How we express pain in training has its own unique vocabulary and "verbal" components.

While Scarry is focused primarily on written and spoken expressions of pain, we in the martial arts frequently use body gestures, facial expressions, and—perhaps most importantly—a predictive "sense" for what might hurt (or is hurting) someone else or ourselves. Being "aware" of our bodies and those we're interacting with frequently depends on non-verbal forms of communication. For Scarry, she sees in non-verbal communications of pain something "regressive," a process that is manipulated in totalitarian regimes and in wartime through things like torture. For her, those pre-verbal modes of the communication of pain carry enormous importance. In our everyday martial arts practice, however, that "regression" is a vital and necessary part of training. Obviously, there's nothing immediately militaristic about our actions, so the fact that we communicate non-verbally doesn't seem (at least initially) to have any political ramifications. What these are, and what these might look like, I'll discuss more fully in my research paper. For the sake of this report, however, I'll simply say that the non-verbal communication of pain in martial arts practice is borne of necessity because our voices aren't always available—or even very reliable.

Scarry discusses at great length the "McGill Pain Questionnaire" as a sign of the growing vocabulary that allows the person in pain to explain to another person as precisely as possible what it is they're feeling. She makes an interesting observation about the terminology used in this questionnaire: almost all the expressions of pain give the sense that something *outside* the person is causing the pain. Something is "piercing" them; something is "burning" them, and so on. Additionally, many of these expressions contain elements of duration/rhythm ("flickering," "pulsing," "throbbing," etc.). These two elements combine, she argues, to give the sense that while pain is experienced internally (and often intensely), it is almost always understood as having an external cause or source.

This initial observation leads her to a much larger conclusion about the nature of the expression of pain: a property she calls its "analogical verification" or its "analogical substantiation." In other words, in the process of articulating pain (whether by the person themselves or by another person on their behalf) pain becomes analogically transferred to someone or something else. In order to express the inherent inexpressibility of pain, one must not simply externalize it but also translate it ("verify" or "substantiate" it) into something else.

She devotes a full chapter to the properties of pain as appears in torture. While this seems to have no direct correspondence to martial arts practice, what I find useful in this section is her attention to the relationship between interrogation (or information gathering) and torture. For her, the cause-effect relationship is inverted in the act of torture. The process of interrogating is not the ends and torture is not the means; interrogation is, according to Scarry, a verbal act of torture: a deterritorializing act that methodically obliterates the prisoner's grasp on material and verbal reality, leaving them with a looser and looser grip on all that embodies their sense of "self." I find the resemblance to the self-willed emptying of the ego in martial arts practice telling. If we glean from Scarry's model not a literal torturer-prisoner dialectic but an *analogical model* for the

relationship between pain and consciousness (on the order of Hegel's master-slave dialectic), then we see that physical exertion, bodily sacrifice, and constantly imagining a harm-causing "opponent" or "attacker" confront the martial artist as ends rather than means (training). This isn't to say that Scarry's implying that we actively seek out pain and that the goal of training is to experience pain; far from it. The point to be made here is that the pain experience is where the martial artist comes to consciousness, where we are most immediately confronted with the emptied ego. For Scarry, asceticism and other forms of bodily discipline are all derivatives of this torturer-prisoner dialectic. The body is externalized as something causing harm to the subject, and in that transformation from something belonging to the subject to something turning against the subject, the subject finds first a mind-body (complementary) opposition. That initial opposition, Scarry argues, ultimately leads to an obliteration of the ego when taken to its extreme. Since we rarely if ever face such dire or extreme bodily circumstances, that utter obliteration of the ego is something of an asymptotic ideal rather than a real and actual end. What we experience when we feel or imagine pain is only a small taste of that complete obliteration of the ego.

While the first half of her book is spent describing pain as a felt experience, the second half of her book is devoted to pain as an imagined experience. She goes so far even as to say that pain is the source of nearly all imaginative and creative work. Again, though, she's not saying that pain is necessary or even needs to be physically felt, but merely imagined. Since, as was explained above, the torturer-prisoner relationship is a dialectic applicable to all consciousness, so too is the relationship between pain and imagining. Here, her earlier discussion of the "analogical substantiation" of pain comes into play. Just as the expression of pain can ultimately lead to the obliteration of the ego, so, too, can it lead to the creation of the world that constitutes a subject's sense of the world around them. Her theory here is a much more nuanced version of common idioms like "that which does not kill us, makes us stronger" and "pain lets us know we are alive," or even of Arnold Schwarzenegger's famous line in *Predator*: "if it bleeds, we can kill it." The idea is that rather than deconstructing and deterritorializing the world (as in the torturer-prisoner dialectic), pain can also be a means to re-construct and re-territorialize. If the body can be made into an external force responsible for inflicting pain on the subject, it can just as easily be turned into an embodiment of felt experience and can extend (rather than contract) the subject's place in the world.

The philosophy underpinning her argument in this last section is a rigorous study of the place of "sympathy" and "empathy," always with an eye toward the central role that the "body in pain" plays in generating those two possible, more positive responses to pain. Where in the torturer-prisoner dialectic, the goal of pain is to alienate and distance the prisoner from his/her own experience (to empty the ego), the sympathetic expression of pain—whether as one's own or another's—is an extension of ego, or better said, an extension *beyond* ego. Pain is given a place in one's own relationship to the world, and thus is not embodied in the external object world, but within the internal subject world of felt (and

shared) experience. To sympathize or empathize with another's pain not only requires a particular vocabulary, but a *place* for its expression. When pain has its place in the world, so, too, does the subject.