Book Review

The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief

David Biro

(W.W. Norton, 2010, 256 pgs.)

Reviewed by Sayantani DasGupta

During moments of crisis—including illness and suffering—stories are the way we human beings make sense out of chaos, meaning out of madness, and form relationships critical to our survival and healing. Over the last two decades, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of narrative in health care. Scholars such as Arthur Kleinman, Arthur Frank, G. Thomas Couser, Alan Radley, and Rita Charon have established intellectual gathering points around notions of self-narration, witness, and testimony. They contemplate how stories function in illness and disability and what stories do to and for both their tellers and receivers.

David Biro’s The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief joins this conversation by meditating upon the relationship between language and pain. In doing so, it revisits Elaine Scarry’s assertion that “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.” Biro ruminates on the isolation wrought by pain upon the sufferer. Drawing from not only his experience as a physician, but also as a patient during his treatment for a rare blood disorder, he describes the pain of a bone marrow transplant as “strangling my vocal cords. Silenced, I felt just like (Edvard) Munch’s sufferer: wanting to scream as loudly as I could but unable to make a sound.”

Yet, the book relies only slightly on Biro’s life as either patient or doctor; it is instead a philosophical meditation on the use of metaphor to represent illness. Biro argues that the preference in literary and real-life illness narratives for military and similar metaphors (pain as weapon, injury, etc.), is born from a phenomenological need to give pain agency and therefore a place in the world. It is through this granting of (metaphorical) agency, Biro suggests, that sufferers can pinpoint, understand and narrate an otherwise inarticulable experience.

Biro’s text also focuses, in chapters entitled “The Mirror” and “The X-ray,” on the importance of “imaging”—and I would add “imag(in)ing”—the body through visual representation. From his own reliance on visualization techniques to deal with gastrointestinal tract ulcers, to the work of Frida Kahlo in making interior pain visible, Biro’s discussion of visual art brings to a point his argument that illness narratives must grapple with pain’s “thingness,” its “being in the world.”

Biro’s argument is both nuanced and beautifully written. But what is difficult to understand is Biro’s
almost utter refusal to place his
text in conversation with certain
seminal texts, including Sontag’s
*Illness as Metaphor*. If Biro’s book
examines how metaphor can help
ill individuals express pain, hers
argued how metaphor was socially
constructed, and harmful to the ill.
Biro’s text similarly misses engaging
with Kleinman’s notion of “social
suffering,” or understandings of
suffering gleaned from Holocaust
studies and other scholarship
around the sufferings caused by
war and trauma. His is ultimately an
individual-centric argument about
pain as an interior experience.

Biro’s primary premise that pain
exists beyond and before language
is neither unique, nor uncontested.
Both Scarry and Arthur Frank have
written about the ‘untellability’ of ill-
ness. Frank calls this type of illness
story “the chaos narrative”: an expe-
rience of suffering so immediate, the
sufferer has no distance or ability to
reflect upon it.

Despite these issues, Biro’s writ-
ing carries the reader through his
ruminations. There are moments of
sheer beauty here. Biro writes, “the
fracturing of the body’s integrity in
pain has its counterpart in the frac-
turing of the self; as the intactness
of the body dissolves, so too does
the intactness of the person as a
whole…pain involves not only a
bracketing of the world (putting out
of play, in Merleau-Ponty’s words),
but a bracketing of the person.”

The notion that pain puts the
body, and therefore the self, ‘out of
play’ brings only more fervor to the
insistence of narrative medicine/
medical humanities upon the role of
story in health care—story becomes
a way of not only communicating
one’s interior experience, but giving
(re)birth to the self.

David Biro’s *The Language of Pain*
joins rich scholarship in narrative
and health care. It does so in beauti-
ful prose and with a careful attention
to canonical literary work and visual
art. What this reader is left wonder-
ing, then, is how to place it. If the
book is to be taken as a new voice
in the growing field of medical hu-
manities, it seems strange that the
work of established scholars is con-
spicuously ignored. In this light, the
book isolates itself in the same way
that it argues that pain might isolate
the sufferer.

However, as a meditation upon
pain, phenomenology, agency, meta-
phor, imagination, and story, Biro’s
new book adds a powerful voice to
the ongoing chorus seeking to place
narrative and health care in harmony.
And as such, it is music to my ears.

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