



THE LANCASTER
INTERNATIONAL FICTION LECTURE
2024

The Alchemy of Literature

A Lecture on Pain

by

Guadalupe Nettel

Translated from the Spanish by Rosalind Harvey

Broadcast on Crowdcast, 22 October 2024

'The Alchemy of Literature: A Lecture on Pain'

by Guadalupe Nettel

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by

Litfest

The Storey

Meeting House Lane

Lancaster LA1 1TH

Copyright © Guadalupe Nettel, 2024

English translation copyright © Rosalind Harvey, 2024

The moral right of Guadalupe Nettel to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Litfest.

The Lancaster International Fiction Lecture is a collaboration between Litfest (Lancaster and District Festival Ltd) and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at Lancaster University.

How beautiful and enigmatic is the image of the alchemists who Marguerite Yourcenar and Umberto Eco portrayed as individuals devoted to the task of transforming base metals into gold. Namely, that which is ugly, heavy, poisonous, even, that which is used to make guns and shackles, into the metal most prized by human beings, the most luminous, the one that represents the brilliance of the sun. All things considered, this was not such a fanciful enterprise. There are many examples in nature of transmutations such as the one the alchemists sought. Mushrooms, for instance, transform rotting stuff into nourishment and purify the earth's toxicity; trees – and plants in general – convert the carbon dioxide produced by cars into oxygen; and oysters clean the impurities from water, to give just a few examples. Literature, and, I would venture to say, art in general, transforms the innumerable pains that human experience entails into beauty: the beauty that exists in Lorenzo Bartolini's sculpture 'The Inconsolable', in the *Song of Songs*, in *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, in the verses of *A Season in Hell*. But

what exactly is this material we are attempting to transform? What is this thing we refer to with the word 'pain', despite the fact it takes so many different forms? Why is it worth even considering?

Let us begin with physical pain. This is very difficult to represent. In general, we lack the words to speak of this experience: we tend to speak of a dull or an acute pain, a muted pain, one that throbs or shoots, a pain that cripples or one that lies in wait. We speak of a twinge, of a burning, of an irritation on the skin. We scarcely know how to indicate the place where it starts: the arm, the head, the belly; but the truth is, we writers lack the vocabulary just as the sick do when trying to explain to their doctor how they feel, and so, in poetry as in novels, there are very few detailed descriptions of this phenomenon. Joan Didion, who suffered from migraines from childhood, tallies up the visible and invisible symptoms of her torment in a powerful essay entitled 'In Bed'. 'The actual headache, when it comes, brings with it chills, sweating, nausea, and a debility that seems to stretch the very limits of endurance.'¹ The Mexican Maria Luisa Puga, too, in her *Diary of Pain*, makes an uncommon effort to express the constant inflammation in her joints caused by her

rheumatoid arthritis. For Puga, her pain is a companion that possesses a well-defined personality as well as a particular appearance: 'It is unctuous, skinny, dark, and always on the prowl.'² The Spanish writer Marta Sanz writes in her novel *Clavicle*:

I describe to the umpteenth doctor the precise place where my pain is. An inexplicable space between my breastbone and my throat. The doctor says: 'That's impossible.' Insistently, I point at a small hollow. I trace circles around it with my index finger. It is a blank space in things, the only region of the body mass where there is absolutely nothing. The doctor crosses the line: 'If I were to stick a needle in exactly this spot, it would come out clean on the other side.'³

There are many pains afflicting Sanz: public health and its problems, capitalism, the indifference of doctors, work, guilt, fear of old age and decrepitude, and writing too, which at times provides company and at others refuses to. All of these are concentrated onto an imprecise point on her slender collar bone.

Didion, Puga and Sanz make one thing clear: there are few experiences as isolating as pain, because, no matter the effort we

make, it is practically impossible for our interlocutor to understand or imagine what we are undergoing. What's more, it is difficult to find someone, whether it be a reader, a relative or a friend, with the disposition to imagine our sensations. Great openness and great empathy are required in order to willingly accept another's pain. We already have plenty with our own. This is why, most of the time, we do not even bother imagining it – our psychological defence mechanisms prevent us from doing so.

In contrast, there is another type of suffering which is less arduous to open ourselves up to: the type we tend to call emotional pain, moral pain or psychic pain. And not only has this been addressed countless times by those who dedicate themselves to literature, but it is also one of the great driving forces of art, one of its main ingredients or raw materials.

More than twenty years ago, when I was first starting to write and didn't yet have much of an idea as to what my subjects would be, I read, at the recommendation of a friend, *The Unquiet Grave* by Cyril Connolly. There I came across a quotation in Pali, which the author translates thus: 'Sorrow is everywhere / In man is no abiding entity / In things no abiding reality.' Connolly attributes

the phrase to the Buddha and adds: 'a dirge that still resounds mournfully in ten thousand monasteries'.⁴ The quote intrigued me so much I decided to investigate this philosophy further, and this was how I discovered that it is focused on nothing less than the elimination of suffering.

When the Buddha reaches enlightenment and decides to teach others how to do so, he gathers together a group of people in the city of Sarnath. This is where he lays down the foundations of his doctrine, known as *The Four Noble Truths*.

The first of these is: 'Suffering exists and is all-pervading.' The suffering or pain that Buddhism speaks of (the word in Sanskrit is Duhkha) is divided into various categories: the first corresponds to a physical and existential pain intrinsic to the human condition. The almost incommunicable pain I mentioned at the beginning. The second corresponds to our reaction to change or loss, whether of things, situations and people, or faculties and possibilities to which we are attached. That is, the suffering caused by the fleeting nature of things, of bonds, of experiences. It is the pain experienced by the teenagers Romeo and Juliet, it is Odysseus's nostalgia when he recalls Ithaca, but it is also a subject we find in the most modern novels like *The*

Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald or *Battles in the Desert*, the best-known novel by the Mexican José Emilio Pacheco, where he painstakingly enumerates all the streets, cinemas, cars, adverts and radio programmes that peopled his childhood in Mexico City during the 1950s. After recalling all of this, and chiefly after recalling his first love, Pacheco ends this brief, moving novel with these words:

So ancient, so remote, such an impossible story. But Mariana existed, Jim existed, everything existed that I've repeated to myself after such a long time refusing to confront it. I'll never know if the suicide was true. I never again saw Rosales or anybody else from that era. They demolished the school, they demolished Mariana's building, they demolished my house, and they demolished Colonia Roma. That city ended. That country is finished. There is no memory of the Mexico of those years. And nobody cares: who could feel nostalgia for that horror?⁵

One senses, in this wry comment with which he ends the book, that feeling of solitude and isolation that sweeps over older people when they recall their youth, and which Pacheco also

broached in several of his poems. Few Spanish-speaking writers have described as well as he the awareness of what the Buddhists call *impermanence* and which is none other than *tempus fugit*, that is, the transitory nature of life and the pain caused by not being able to come to terms with its speed.

The third variant of Duhkha that Buddhism refers to describes a very subtle, profound type of suffering, a dissatisfaction that comes with existence itself and which can be glimpsed in the question about the meaning of life, the 'To be or not to be' of Hamlet, or the aphorisms that Emil Cioran compiles under the intriguing title of *The Trouble with Being Born*.

Another of Buddhism's premises is that, except for physical pain, all suffering originates in the mind due to attachment, aversion and the mistaken ideas that we have about who we are. Trying to reject or ignore suffering only makes it more powerful, but so too does the habit of growing too fond of it.

Although a writer's work is inspired in large part by experiences and a careful observation of the world and our fellow human beings, it is equally inspired by books written by others. There are many authors who have helped me to look at

pain head on and it would take me far too long to mention all of them here. Andrea Bajani is one of them. His book *If You Kept a Record of Sins* tells of the profound sadness and loneliness experienced by a little boy abandoned by his mother, while *Do You Recognise Me?* speaks of the death of his best friend and mentor, the Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi. Another of Bajani's novels, written in the form of a fable and entitled *A Good in the World*, opens like this:

Once upon a time there was a little boy who had a pain which never left him. He carried it with him everywhere. He crossed the fields in the mornings to go to school. When he was in the classroom, the pain would curl up at his feet and for five hours it stayed there, its eyes closed, not breathing. At break time, it went out with the boy and his classmates to the playground, and when the school day finished, the boy crossed the field on the way back home with the pain by his side. It didn't need a lead because it would never have escaped, and nor did it need a muzzle because it would never have hurt anyone.

There are writers we read because they seem likeable, funny, interesting, and there are writers we read as we converse with that wise part of ourselves, which we hardly ever come into contact. In this second group I place, for instance, the French writer Emmanuel Carrère.

I began to read his novel *Other Lives but Mine* without knowing what it was about. My father had just been diagnosed with terminal bladder cancer, and reading was one of the ways I used to distract myself from the anticipatory grief, almost as excruciating and far more distressing than real grief. The story seemed to be clear: the narrator was in Sri Lanka at the time of the tsunami, the unforgettable images of which we all saw on television. You didn't need to make much effort to get lost in the plot of this novel. Nevertheless, shortly afterwards, Carrère went back to France and the story changed completely. The subject was no longer the tsunami, but rather the agony of those who spend their lives accompanying a loved one who is sick with cancer. That is, the book spoke of exactly what was happening to me, of the thing I was attempting to distract myself from. Despite what one might think, rather than deepening my anguish, submerging myself in the story of Juliette and Étienne the judge,

of their friendship based on the experience of illness, of physical suffering and of imminent death, helped me to understand what was happening to me, but helped me, particularly, to stop focusing so much on my own suffering and to focus instead on that of my father, on what he was feeling, on his own distress, on his rage, on the story that had led him to this point. In this book, several writers are mentioned, and two of them stayed with me: Fritz Zorn and his novel *Mars*, the only book by this Swiss author, in which he speaks of cancer, of his own cancer, as the culmination of a family and a personal history but above all as the consequence of never having allowed himself to express his anger. The other is the psychoanalyst Pierre Cazenave, whose essays on illness as a method of self-knowledge lit my way in my attempts to understand what my father was going through. Emmanuel Carrère quotes a passage from Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* in *Other Lives but Mine* that sums up his novel's thesis most eloquently. It reads as follows: 'Maybe that's what we seek our whole lives long, nothing more, the greatest possible sorrow, so that we can become ourselves before we die.'

The death of my father, above all, but also that of other much beloved people I was close to, taught me that, in the moments of the greatest pain, the neurotic carapace we tend to barricade ourselves behind disappears, or at least develops cracks, and this gives us the opportunity to establish an intimate contact with others, an exceptional contact. This discovery gave rise to my novel *After the Winter*, in which four characters go through moments of devastating loss while at the same time discovering the possibility of encountering the other.

If in Buddhism the masters teach through their way of being in the world and how they are (one learns by watching them, by the fact of being in their company), in the case of writers this transmission takes place via their books. The thing they transmit is their own perception of the world. What is it that Carrère has taught me to see? Other people, first and foremost. To look at them as he describes them in his books, with empathy, with curiosity, with a desire to understand even the most disturbed and cruel of human beings.

I agree with Amos Oz when he says that 'to read a novel is like being invited into other people's living rooms, their nurseries, their studies and even their bedrooms. You are invited

into their secret sorrows, into their family joys, into their dreams.’⁶ Although we might belong to different cultures or different moments in time, human beings are not so different from one another. Literature is a highly subtle code which manages to open, if only for a moment, the most closed off hearts and minds. It has the power to connect us beyond ideologies, with our most basic emotions such as fear, humiliation, tenderness, suffering and the compassion that can arise from this. It has the power to nudge us into the intimate sphere of other people and other communities, even enemy communities, as Oz suggests, to make us share with them their story, their daily lives, their fears, their desires, their perspectives, their experiences and, especially, their pain.

It seems to me that one of the most remarkable qualities of fiction is that it allows us access to subjectivity like no other artform. Human beings have a highly intimate relationship with words. We think in words, we dream in words. Words, when well chosen, can allow us to construct images, to express emotions, to name things and describe those things which cannot be named.

There are times when books are not only a window, as Oz would have it, but rather are indisputably a portal or a time machine that transports us to other realities, that takes us not only into the house but also the body and mind of other people, real or imaginary; in short, they allow us to *be others*. I, for example, was Gregor Samsa; I was the austere Bernarda Alba, and I was each one of her daughters. I was the son of Pedro Páramo, I was Annie Ernaux and felt her peasant girl shame in the classist world of the university, and I felt the desire of Humbert Humbert towards a 14-year-old girl, and that of Carmen Maria Machado for a badly-behaved Harvard graduate. I was Jean-Claude Romand and I knew I had no option but to kill my entire family before they discovered my despicable behaviour. Thanks to Gaël Faye, I felt the agony of the persecution of the Tutsi by the Hutu during the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi. Books allow us to reincarnate, because what is reincarnation if not to live again, in another body in other circumstances and another time? In books, the memory of humanity is printed. Like the characters in *Our Share of Night*, by Mariana Enriquez, humans continue to dream of cheating death, of somehow remaining in this ephemeral world, of transferring

our consciousness, another of the ambitions attributed to the alchemists. We forget that when writing was invented, we discovered the secret of immortality. This is how we transfer our consciousness into other bodies, and also the most common, simple, quotidian way of communicating with the dead, one that requires no sacrifice in exchange. It is enough to devote a few hours of our time and attention to them, to receive the experience, wisdom and advice of those who lived before us in this world. It does not matter if they did so in the last century, in the Renaissance, or in ancient Egypt. Books preserve the history, the wisdom, the incantations and the sorcery of our ancestors. Is that not a feat of magic more powerful and indisputable even than that which the alchemists sought?

I shall take the liberty of including one little postscript.

Why do you think that, even now, in the twenty-first century, books are being banned? They are banned because they liberate, because they open minds, because they can generate enough empathy to make us break with imposed loyalties such as that of the army, nationalism or racism. They are banned because they make us free and because they incite us to

subversion. In other words, books are powerful and to some people this power represents a threat.

The books that I have mentioned here are not always easy to read. Often, when I recommend them to my students or my friends, they say: 'Ugh! That's the last thing I need right now. Can't you recommend something that will make me laugh?' And then I recall Woody Allen's mathematical formula: 'Comedy is tragedy plus time.' I think he was spot on. Why do we laugh when we recall the misfortunes from our past? Precisely because it is possible to transcend pain, but in order to do so we must go through it. Often the perspective provided by the passage of the years allows us to see that, consciously or unconsciously, we chose this suffering because the experience of pain, whether our own or someone else's, has a few important advantages. It allows us, on the one hand, to truly connect with others. 'To feel with the other' is the etymological sense of 'compassion', that word that originally had nothing to do with looking at pityingly or patronisingly. On the other hand, pain is an uncomfortable yet highly effective way of learning. Neurologists and psychologists know this perfectly well, and I'm not referring only to the pragmatic Ivan Pavlov who, when he inflicted pain on the

animals in his laboratory, managed to increase their intelligence, but also to Carl Gustav Jung, the father of analytical psychology. To conclude, I would like to quote a sentence from his book *Psychology and Alchemy*, which will, I hope, return to readers the desire to read challenging stories:

People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own Soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.⁷

NOTES

¹ Joan Didion, 'In Bed' in *The White Album. Essays* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979).

² Maria Luisa Puga, *Diario del dolor* (Diary of Pain) (Mexico City: UNAM, Dirección General de Publicaciones y Fomento Editorial (Kindle), 2021).

³ Marta Sanz, *Clavícula* (Clavicle) (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2017).

⁴ Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave*, Viking Press (Compass Books series), 1957, p. 21.

⁵ José Emilio Pacheco, *Battles in the Desert*, translated from the Spanish by Katie Silver (New York: New Directions, 2021).

⁶ Amos Oz: Speech on receiving the Prince of Asturias Award For Literature 2007 (<https://www.fpa.es/en/princess-of-asturias-awards/laureates/2007-amos-oz/?texto=discurso>).

⁷ Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, (2nd edition, London: Routledge, 1980), p. 99.

Guadalupe Nettel was born in Mexico and grew up 'between Mexico and France'. She is the author of the award-winning novels *The Body Where I Was Born* (2011), *After the Winter* (2014, Herralde Novel Prize) and *Still Born* (2020, shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2023), and three collections of short stories. She was editor of the prestigious *Revista de la Universidad de México* (2017–24) and her work has been translated into more than 15 languages. In spring 2025, Fitzcarraldo Editions will publish her new story collection, *The Accidentals*, in an English translation by Rosalind Harvey.

Rosalind Harvey has translated many writers including Juan Pablo Villalobos, Elvira Navarro, Alberto Barrera Tyszka and Enrique Vila-Matas. Their work has been shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and the Oxford–Weidenfeld Translation Prize. Harvey is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a founding member of the Emerging Translators Network.