

Seeing and thinking about suffering in the Middle Ages

Ver y pensar el sufrimiento en la Edad Media

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DOI: 10.35429/EJRS.2021.13.7.34.43

Received July 30, 2021; Accepted December 30, 2021

Abstract

In history, one of the main stigmas of humanity has been and still is pain. Its origin goes back to the dawn of time, when it was inflicted on men by the biblical God as a punishment for their disobedience. From that moment on, man loses his paradisiacal perennity, being condemned to fall from eternity into time, that is to say, into History ; this experience is lived with pain, being linked, mainly, to illness. Thus, throughout the centuries, in the different civilizations and cultures that have succeeded one another, pain and all that it entails has been an immense obstacle and has caused constant anxiety, being omnipresent in the daily life of individuals. The Middle Ages eloquently attests to this.

Resumen

En la historia, uno de los principales estigmas de la humanidad ha sido y es el dolor. Su origen se remonta al principio de los tiempos, cuando fue infligido a los hombres por el Dios bíblico como castigo por su desobediencia. A partir de ese momento, el hombre pierde su perennidad paradisiaca, estando condenado a caer desde la eternidad en el tiempo, es decir, en la Historia; esta experiencia se vive con dolor, estando ligada, principalmente, a la enfermedad. Así, a lo largo de los siglos, en las diferentes civilizaciones y culturas que se han sucedido, el dolor y todo lo que conlleva ha sido un inmenso obstáculo y ha provocado una constante ansiedad, estando omnipresente en la vida cotidiana de los individuos. La Edad Media da cuenta de ello elocuentemente.

Pain, Suffering, Middle Ages, Images

Dolor, Sufrimiento, Edad Media, Imágenes

Citation: SÁNCHEZ-USÓN, María José. Seeing and thinking about suffering in the Middle Ages. ECORFAN Journal-Republic of El Salvador. 2021. 7-13:34-43.

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Introduction

In history, one of the main stigmas of humanity has been and still is pain. Its origin goes back to the dawn of time, when it was inflicted on men by the biblical God as a punishment for their disobedience. The book of *Genesis* records the moment when Yahweh expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise for eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, with the following words:

To the woman he said: «I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master».

To the man he said: « Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, "Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life.

Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return » (Genesis 3 :16-19).

From that moment on, man loses his paradisiacal perennity, being condemned to fall from eternity into time, that is to say, into History ; this experience is lived with pain, being linked, mainly, to illness. Thus, throughout the centuries, in the different civilizations and cultures that have succeeded one another, pain and all that it entails has been an immense obstacle and has caused constant anxiety, being omnipresent in the daily life of individuals. However, the attitude of societies towards painful sensations has not been one of passive inaction ; on the contrary, they have constantly sought all possible mechanisms to eradicate them, or at least to alleviate them, trying to find their origin and causes.

In the Middle Ages, despite the dominant christian conception of pain as a means of expiation, linking it to the exemplary patience of Job, the medieval archetype of christian piety, and to the sufferings endured by Christ during his passion and until his death, progress in the treatment and cure of diseases was unstoppable. Heir to the Greco-Latin knowledge, in the 7th century, Saint Isidore of Seville defines in his *Etymologies* the concept of "medicine":

Medicina est quae corporis vel tuetur vel restaurat salute: cuius materia versatur in morbis et vulneribus. Ad hanc itaque pertinent non ea tantum quae ars eorum exhibet, qui proprie medici nominantur, sed etiam cibus et potus, tegmen et tegumen. Defensio denique omnis atque munitio, qua [sanum] nostrum corpus adversus externos ictus casusque servatur (San Isidoro de Sevilla, 2004, pp. 472-473).

But it was the arabs who, after their essential work of translation from Greek, gathered the sum of the medical knowledge of Antiquity, taking care to determine in the human body the precise location of pain. For example, the Persian Avicenna (980-1037) defined it as a concrete sensation associated with the nervous system. His work, included in the texts *The Book of Healing* and *The Canon of Medicine*, had a great influence in christian Europe, inspiring the work of later great thinkers such as Albert the Great (1193-1280), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and the Bolognese physician Mondino de Lucci (1265-1326); the latter would designate the brain as the place where the impression of pain is generated. Thus, pain is understood as a sensation of the body part. It is therefore undeniable that

Pain has a clear bodily component. The bodily sensitivity sharply reflects the discomfort of pain. Bodily pain is strongly rejected by the person, provoking a real repugnance. The body appears to the person, as a source of pain, as hostile and degraded. The body image is disastrous. The growth of the person suffers (Fuster, 2004, p. 268).

Pain and suffering

It is well understood that pain (a temporary discomfort or an illness) is a given of the human condition. For us humans, pain is a measure that brings us closer to the corporeal dimension of existence. It reminds us that we are alive and mortal. It is therefore a paradoxical concept, since pain is, at the same time, the privilege and the tragedy of the human being. On the basis of this reflection, we confront ourselves with a metaphysical anthropology:

Anthropology and metaphysics cannot be separated. The anthropology of pain demands a metaphysics of suffering, which must necessarily involve the metaphysics of being and of the person, as we noted above. In a certain sense, the thought of suffering "revolutionizes" metaphysical understanding. Thus, pain configures homo patiens, in a unique experience suffered in the integrality of man -in the body, in the psyche, in the spirit-.

This personal configuration of pain significantly involves the body, consciousness, time and the self (Fuster, 2004, p. 268).

But is it the same thing as pain is? Should we make a distinction between these two concepts, or should we assimilate them if they are equivalent? Are we facing a dualism?

In the history of philosophy, most of its representatives had to face this transcendental dualism ; the examples are numerous. Plato, Aristotle, the Fathers of the Church... and much later, Schopenhauer or Cioran... speak about the existence of pleasure and pain, of contradictory values corresponding to good and evil. It is from their thoughts that the problems of pain and suffering are questioned, as well as the cogitations on the nature of evil, the finality of life and the finitude of man.

Here is the first point to consider. There is a dualism (or several dualisms) to be resolved: a long-known dualism between the body and the soul (or spirit). From this point of view, we can speak of a physical pain and a psychic or moral suffering, given that we traditionally separate the pain of the flesh and the suffering of the psyche. This distinction opposes the body and the soul of man as if they were two different realities, when in truth they are not so different; therefore, the pain-suffering dualism is no more founded than the body-spirit dualism.

But what happens in the Middle Ages? Here, dualism is fully objectified. At that time, this undeniable, dual and fractured behavior is, on the other hand, a constant in medieval man, coming from the christian binomial soul/body. It is the religious conception that underlies the idea of the drama, and will be assumed by certain romantic authors, tributary of the Middle Ages. I think, for example, of Victor Hugo when he writes:

Du jour où le christianisme a dit à l'homme : « Tu es double, tu es composé de deux êtres, l'un périssable, l'autre immortel, l'un charnel, l'autre éthéré, l'un enchaîné par les appétits, les besoins et les passions, l'autre emporté sur les ailes de l'enthousiasme et de la rêverie, celui-ci enfin toujours courbé vers la terre, sa mère, celui-là sans cesse élançé vers le ciel, sa patrie » ; de ce jour le drame a été créé (Hugo, 1912, p. 23).

The dramatic condition of the man in the Middle Ages seems obvious. Far from being a tragic individual who accepts his fate and destiny (in the Nietzschean manner), he accepts pain, suffering, torture and all the trials that are destructive as a means of expiation and redemption. This is the christian dimension that governs his life. From this acceptance, immersed in a theocentric world, he interprets and accepts his reality without revolt.

The Church will play a decisive role in this respect. In the theological defense of a being split into body and soul, medieval men and women suffer in silence in this "valley of tears", which for them is the earth, with the aim of winning his soul for Heaven, which is the true life, a supernatural life, that is to say: the real.

The dualism of body and soul was defended in the Middle Ages; but let us remember that the double representation of the human person - soul and body - is not an invention of Christianity. This representation is already that of Platonism, which will occupy an important part in christian theology, and which can be described as dualist. Later, medieval theology would offer us hundreds of variants of the following statement, which can be seen as the central axis of the christian conception of the person: the human being is made up of a body, carnal and perishable, and a single soul, a spiritual entity, immaterial and immortal.

Centuries later, modern thought, in rejecting this division of the man, also rejects the fact that pain, which is physical in nature, and suffering, which is psychological, are categories that must be thought of separately. We even come to abandon the use of a deeply rooted vocabulary that integrates a disjunction between what belongs to the body on the one hand and what belongs to the mind on the other, as if the human condition were not from the outset, and in an irreducible way, a bodily condition.

Finally, pain is a medical concept and suffering a concept of the subject who feels it. It seems that it is necessary to distinguish between them without separating them.

The medieval world accepts this dualism because it is dominated by marked antagonisms, which paradoxically lodge, grow and emerge in acts, attitudes and the individual and social imaginary : good and evil, the sublime and the humble, the spiritual and the material, the sinister and the comic, virtue and temptation, sin and forgiveness, life and death are all present in daily life in the Middle Ages, in a proportion and balance incomprehensible to the man of today. There are no boundaries between the visible and the invisible. The medievalist Jacques Le Goff will say of medieval man that not only: “lo visible es para él la huella de lo invisible, sino que lo sobrenatural irrumpe en su vida cotidiana a cada instante” (Le Goff, 1995, p. 38).

The testimony of medieval images

The Middle Ages is a period in which pain and suffering are recognized as having mutual implications. The images left to us by the artistic manifestations of the time are often more eloquent than the narratives and allow us to see, to apprehend, and then to think about them with more accuracy. Diseases, wars, injustices, poverty, executions, torture, martyrdom, loneliness, anguish, despair... are largely described by means of visual, graphic and plastic arts in wall paintings, cloister and church decorations, as well as in illuminated manuscripts. These works certainly make us think and perhaps think with Voltaire that: “La comparaison de ces siècles avec le nôtre doit nous faire sentir notre bonheur” (Voltaire, 1773, p. 73).

From a theological point of view, those responsible for most of the plagues suffered by humanity are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse : the White Horse (Conquest), the Red Horse (War), the Black Horse (Famine), the Pale Horse (Death/Epidemic).



Figure 1 "The Four Horsemen", The *Beatus* of Ferdinand I and Sancie, f. 145r. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid

They are particularly represented in this page of the codex *Beatus de Liebana*, a commentary on the *Apocalypse* of Saint John, written in the eighth century by the monk Beatus in the Hispanic kingdom of Asturias. This is the copy commissioned by King Ferdinand I of Castile and Leon and his wife, Queen Sancha, which was written by the copyist Facundus and completed in 1047 (Fig. 1).

In the fourteenth century, the Pale Horse of epidemics ravaged Europe. Between 1347 and 1348, a previously unknown disease, the bubonic plague, black plague or black death, which came from Asia and was transmitted by infected fleas, ravaged more than a third of the European population. This unfortunate situation caused both a demographic and economic catastrophe.



Figure 2 Ms. 1438. University Library, Bologna

This supra image shows a physician auscultating and treating the buboes of a plague patient; these are swollen lymph nodes that can open and form oozing sores (Fig. 2).

In a world of insecurity and uncertainty, diseases coexist with medieval man constantly, and he tries, available to him, to curb them. The existing medical treatises are also numerous; they include the main diseases and the known remedies to fight them. The image below belongs to the fourteenth-century *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, a medieval health manual based on an Arabic medical treatise written by Ibn Butlân around 1050 (Fig. 3). It shows a man vomiting blood and being helped by his wife, as is still customary today: the woman placing her hands on the patient's forehead.



Figure 3 "Vomitus". *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, Codex Vindobonensis, Ser. N. 2644, f.99v., XIVème siècle. Nationalbibliothek, Vienne

In the Middle Ages, surgical operations were also common. Here is a trepanning of a man's brain apparently without anesthesia (Fig. 4). This is *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, one of the pictorial works belonging to the first stage of the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch from the late 15th century.

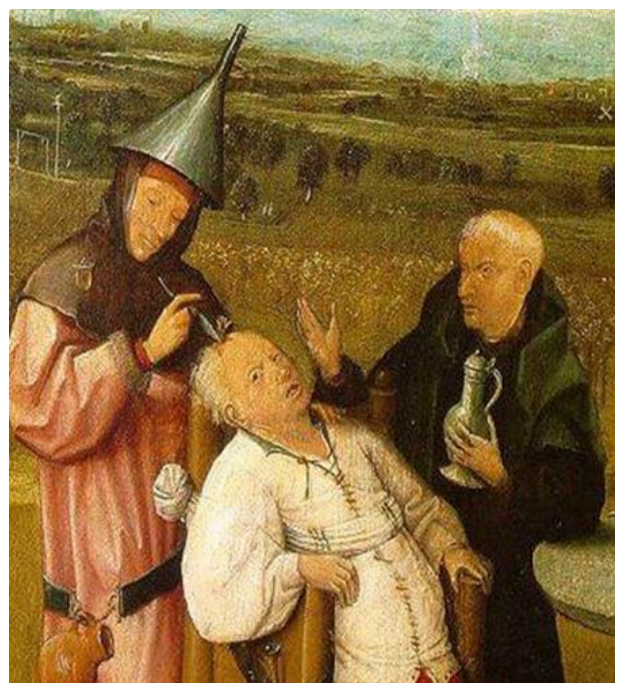


Figure 4 *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*. Jérôme Bosch, ca. 1494. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

This painting describes a type of surgery that, according to written accounts, consisted of removing a stone that caused the man's madness. It illustrates the medieval custom of believing that madmen had a stone lodged in their heads. However, some minor operations were entrusted to barbers, who were responsible for pulling teeth without the use of anesthesia (Fig. 5). On the other hand, the medieval imagination believed that toothaches are painful because they are inhabited by demons and worms. This idea remained unchanged until the 18th century.



Figure 5 Letter "D" of the manuscript *Omne bonum*, Royal 6 E VI, fol. 503v., James le Palmer, 1360-1375. British Library, London

In general, pain and moral suffering cannot be separated. This is the case with the situation of the medieval recluses (Fig. 6). These women were volunteers who, in their youth, were locked up as undead. Protected by the ecclesiastical hierarchies and fed by the municipalities, they had a propitiatory function for the cities. Walled up in a cell that was too small, dedicated to suffering or prayer, living on public charity, the recluses were familiar figures in the Middle Ages. And if in our time reclusion has become synonymous with punishment, it has long embodied a form of spiritual perfection. At the same time, for hundreds of women left behind and marginalized, it could at least represent a last honorable refuge.



Figure 6 «Perceval in conversation with his recluse aunt ». Ms. 343, fol. 21v. BNF, Paris

But “la réclusion volontaire est certainement la forme de mort au monde la plus rigoureuse que le christianisme ait conçue [...] La réclusion permet d’éclairer en particulier les liens étroits qui lient la femme et la mort” (L’Hermite Leclercq, 1994, p. 151).

Despite the exceptional spiritual and symbolic function that the recluses had, they could not fight against sadness, an automatic response of the organism, a psychic manifestation that responds to unfavorable circumstances, painful and persistent states, deficiencies of resources, negative and anguishing thoughts and frustrations of all kinds.

One of the manifestations of sadness was *acedia*, a disease marked by “l’instabilité, l’incapacité de tenir des engagements, la perte de sens et la désespérance” (Nault, s.d.), (Fig. 7). It is the monastic tradition that has named "*acedia*" to this kind of spiritual laziness that at certain hours reaches the monks or those who dedicate themselves to an ascetic life of silence and prayer ; it is not for nothing that this affliction has been called "the demon of noon". In christian circles, the first to speak of it was Evagrius the Pontic, one of the desert Fathers of the fourth century.



Figure 7 "Acedia", The Seven Deadly Sins and The Four Last Human Steps. Jérôme Bosch, 1475-1480. Museo Nacional del Prado Madrid

In the Middle Ages, women were often punished by their husbands, being locked up, beaten and even killed by them. The following image shows a husband beating his wife in front of servants or neighbors, with no one coming to his aid (Fig. 8).



Figure 8 *Roman de la Rose*, detail of the manuscript copied ca. 1490-1500 in Bruges. British Library, London.

For their wives, considered most of the time as an object belonging to them, the husbands were at the same time fathers and bosses. They suffered daily not only from physical pain, but also from psychological after-effects that plunged them into states of extreme anxiety, so that, feeling powerless, an abysmal depression led them to *desperatio*.

Le désespoir n'est pas seulement la condition du pécheur qui se retrouve privé de toute possibilité de rédemption. Il est aussi un vice. En effet, en tant que tristesse excessive, le désespoir (*desperatio*) s'oppose à la vertu de l'espérance (*spes*). Tout comme la figure de l'endeuillé et celle du damné, la représentation du désespoir en tant que vice reprend encore une fois les signes visuels de l'affliction. Dans *Le Roman de la Rose*, parmi les différents portraits de vices qui sont peints ou sculptés sur la muraille d'un verger, se trouve celui de Tristesse (Marcoux, 2011, p. 2).



Figure 9 «Sadness». *Les enluminures du Roman de la Rose*, Ms. P. A. 23, f°5v, XIV^{ème} siècle, Bibliothèque Municipale de la Part-Dieu, Lyon

In this image we see a desperate woman tearing her dress and pulling out her hair (Fig. 9). In the end, the unbearable suffering leads to suicide.

Le mot « suicide » n'existait pas au Moyen Age. Il n'est apparu qu'aux XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles [...] Le Moyen Age n'employait pas un mot, mais des périphrases diverses : « être homicide de soi-même », « s'occir soi-même », « se meurtrir » ... Toutes définissaient un homicide dont l'auteur était en même temps la victime. Mais assurément, le suicidé était considéré avant tout comme l'auteur d'un crime, non comme sa victime. Or un homicide au Moyen Age n'était pas l'équivalent d'un homicide aujourd'hui : pour son auteur, et même, en dehors des cas de suicide, pour la victime (cas de « mort subite »), il était une terrifiante option sur l'au-delà. Ainsi en allait-il en particulier du suicide (Schmitt, 1976, p. 4).

The christian church therefore excommunicated people who attempted to commit suicide and those who finally did, so that they could not be buried in the sacredness of the christian church.



Figures 10, 11 Details of the miniatures of the manuscript "Le suicide de Pancharus", *Puissance d'amours*, Ms. 526, f. 10, XIVth century. Richard de Fournival. Dijon Municipal Library. Photo IRHT; rights of the community, CNRS and MCC



Figure 12 Full page of the manuscript "Le suicide de Pancharus", *Puissance d'amours*, Ms. 526, f. 10, XIVth century. Richard de Fournival. Dijon Municipal Library. Photo IRHT; rights of the community, CNRS and MCC

The preceding images could well be allegories of suicide (Figs. 10, 11, 12). They evoke the tragic character of Pancharus who, desperate to have killed by mistake his beloved, the queen of Femenia, commits suicide:

Pancharus, sénéchal et connétable de Trace, qui, trop épris de la reine de Femenie, négligeait de défendre les terres de son seigneur. Celui-ci, pour lui faire oublier la dame, l'envoya hors du pays. Mais Pancharus revint de nuit et pénétra secrètement dans la chambre où son amie dormait. Ayant entendu deux respirations sortir du lit, il crut que sa dame le trompait et la transperça de son épée ; puis découvrit le lit et reconnut que c'était, non un rival, mais une petite chienne qui « alenoit si fort ». De désespoir, il se tua (Langlois, 1904, p. 109).

This fragment summarizes one of the stories in *Puissance d'amours*, a work by Richard de Fournival, canon of Amiens Cathedral, doctor and French poet of the 13th century. Part of the literary and cultural movement of Courtly Love, or Fin 'Amor as it is called in Occitan, this text is one of a series of works that served young knights in their apprenticeship and initiation to the game of love. Contrary to what one might think, the didactic and religious dimensions are present in this type of text. Consequently, if the suicide and the feeling which animates it are here a dramatic literary reason they are not less condemnable. "À la gesticulation succède alors le geste irrémédiable de l'autodestruction accompli ici à l'aide d'une épée que Pancharus plonge dans son abdomen. Ces [...] images affirment ainsi, on ne peut plus clairement, le lien de causalité qui existe au Moyen Âge entre le désespoir et la damnation éternelle" (Marcoux, 2011, p. 5).

In conclusion, after these examples, it appears that it was necessary to live this medium aevum bearing the full weight of pain and suffering in order to gain eternal life. This was the only objective that the believer had to conquer. We must not forget that to the list of adverse situations we must add many others, such as war, the red horse of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; the torture of heretics condemned to the stake; the memory of the calvary of the ancient christian martyrs and those of this era ; without omitting to mention the constant and silent affliction of the serfs working from dawn to dusk in execrable living conditions.

But, since the christian vision, the men and women of the Middle Ages have a powerful and unquestionable model in which they can contemplate their torments and sorrows reflected and compared: it is Jesus Christ. If he suffers, men also suffer with him. In the 13th century, representations of the crucifixion continued to grow. The image of the Crucified expresses all the anguish of the pain of a dying god in the image of the man.

To come closer to this model, Christians have an archetype, an exemplary and inspiring man : it is the subiectus, the submissive one, incarnated by Job, the biblical saint, who endures all the trials of Satan, authorized by God, without renouncing his faith and respecting the divine will : «The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away ; blessed be the name of the Lord ! ». However, let us not forget that this dark image of the Middle Ages is not the only one we can reconstruct. During these centuries, people enjoy life, have fun, celebrate and hope that evil will quickly dissipate and good will enter their lives without delay. After all, it is a doubled age that is not so different from ours.

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