

# Bodies in Pain

## *Ancient and Modern Horizons of Expectation*

*They have knowledge of no flesh but mortal flesh, and the entirety of their argument amounts to supposing that what they have not experienced is not possible.*

—AUGUSTINE, *CITY OF GOD* 21.3

Far and wide he bloodies the fields, striking his head on rocks, he bounces; thorn bushes snatch away his hair, a hard stone lays waste to his handsome face, and his luckless beauty passes away from many a wound. The swift wheels roll over his dying limbs; and finally, a tree trunk, projecting with a point sharpened in the fire, holds him fast by a spike thrust through the middle of his groin. For a little while, with its master stuck, the chariot stands still, the horses are stopped by the wound—but then they burst both the delay and their master. After that, half dead, the shrubs cut him, rough bramble-bushes with sharp thorns and every stem carries off a part of his body. The slaves, funeral bands, wander around the fields, through the places where Hippolytus, torn in pieces, marks an extended path with a blood-stained sign, and sorrowful dogs hunt for their master's limbs. Not yet has the mourners' diligent work succeeded in completing the body. (*Phaedr.* 1093–1114)

Thus Seneca, sometime around the middle of the first century CE, relates the death of Hippolytus. His graphic description of death is disturbing: the audience's visual imagination is engaged so that they see Hippolytus's body being destroyed bit by bit; they follow after the slaves who trace the bloody path of destruction, retrieving a limb or a piece of flesh, and they imagine a body laid out but falling well short of wholeness. The story is also unsettling because absent from its long and detailed description of dismemberment is any hint of the physical sensations Hippolytus may have felt as his body was disassembled and strewn about. The audience's expectation for indicators of pain is heightened by Seneca's thick description—head bouncing on rocks, scalping, a body impaled—but this expectation is not satisfied: Hippolytus's experience of pain remains unexamined. Interestingly,

markers of pain may be found in those who labor to put Hippolytus back together again: the mourning funereal band and the sad dogs.

Seneca is not the only pagan, post-Augustan author to dwell on bodily dissolution without accompanying descriptions of pain. His younger contemporary Lucan shows similar interests in depicting painless dismemberment. In his *Civil War*, Lucan tells of Catus's deathblows, received simultaneously to his back and chest. His blood—itself anthropomorphized—stands still, “uncertain from which wound to flow” (3.589). But a moment later, “an abundance of blood” forces out both spears and Catus dies (3.590–91). Lucan's writing is deft and graphic: the mind's eye visualizes the force of blood that expels the spears. Pain, though, is absent. Lucan tells of another Greek warrior who grabs on to a Roman vessel, but his hand is immediately cut off. The newly single hand acts independently of its body, “holding on with tightened muscles” before it “grew stiff with death” (3.612–13). The warrior is not deterred but instead leans across the water to claim his severed hand; in the process his left arm is amputated (3.617–18). The mortally wounded warrior does not retreat but uses what is left of his body as a human shield. His virtue and fortitude are on full display; his pain is not. In still another episode Lycidas is pierced by a grappling-iron; his comrades attempt to save him from falling into the water, but rather than saving him their actions tear him apart (3.638). Lucan describes how slowly death comes to the warrior's different body parts, from his torso to his vitals to his lungs. In those places where the vital organs lie, though, his fate, Lucan reports, “was arrested” (3.642–46). Though dismemberment is painstakingly described in *Bellum Civile*, pain is not a locus of meaning for Lucan. Indeed, in Seneca's and Lucan's works, “the mental sufferings of the physically wounded are scarcely if ever mentioned,” as Glenn Most observes.<sup>1</sup> “Fictional bodies are gashed,” Most continues, but their suffering is not of concern.

Noticing the narrative silence regarding the pain of dismemberment in these non-Christian literary texts may help modern readers discern and explore narrative interests in the tortured bodies that are the focus of Christian martyr texts. This is the case because it is easier to notice seemingly counterintuitive relationships between the destruction of the body and the sensations felt by the body when the depictions are not found in the pages of religious writing; when there are limited expectations for the historicity—or even the historical verisimilitude—of the narrative; when the body being wounded is not that of a saint; and when theological or Christological overlays are not in play. Seneca and Lucan challenge us to be attentive to, and demand that we attend to, the meanings of narratives that remain silent about the pain associated with a body being destroyed.

That Seneca and Lucan chose not to include a description of pain is noteworthy since it could have been otherwise. The first and second centuries CE saw the development—independent of Christianity—of a “particular representation of the human self as a body liable to pain and suffering,” as Judith Perkins has argued in

*The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era.*<sup>2</sup> Perkins surveys a wide range of literature from disparate geographical regions and cultural provenances to demonstrate the emergence of this new “suffering self.” She recalls Apuleius, for instance, who tells his Carthaginian audience about twisting an ankle “so violently at the wrestling school that I almost tore the joint from my leg.” The dislocated ankle led to a sweat and chill, which was followed by “an agonizing pain in the bowels which only subsided as its violence was on the point of killing me.”<sup>3</sup> Offering another example of this emerging discourse of a suffering body, Perkins summarizes part of the plot of Achilles Tatius’s novel in this way: “Twice . . . bandits appeared to kill Leucippe gruesomely. The first time, Clitophon watched as she was disemboweled and her intestines roasted and eaten (3.15.1–5). In another episode the pirates apparently beheaded her and threw the separated parts overboard (5.7.4).”<sup>4</sup> She demonstrates that a wide variety of Roman authors participated in a discourse that depicted the body in pain.<sup>5</sup> If this is an age in which many authors are constructing identities that center on the body’s experience of pain, then the narrative absence of pain may itself be an important marker of the self. As we shall see, texts that reject pain engage with the larger cultural discourse even as they map an alternative to it.

Before delving into how the texts themselves function, I examine in this chapter the various ways modern and ancient horizons of expectation for martyr narratives may vary and how these differences can influence interpretation. To imagine how early Christians might have experienced these texts, we must strip away centuries of theological and historical interpretation and recognize that these views would have been foreign to the earliest audiences. We cannot of course reconstruct the precise experiences of early Christian hearers. But the process of peeling away layers of later traditions helps us see that much of what seems obvious and commonsensical now was not necessarily so in the first centuries of Christian history. Seneca and Lucan demonstrate that narratives of dismemberment are not necessarily narratives about pain. So also the evidence suggests that for many early Christians the triumph of the martyrs was precisely in their impassibility, not in their experience of pain. However, the shifts in interpretation that occurred in the medieval and early modern periods may continue to exert influence over our understandings of martyr texts. In medieval culture, for instance, the experience of pain came to be seen as a way to draw nearer to Christ whose painful death brought salvation. At the same time, medieval jurists associated painlessness in the face of torture with magic. Not surprisingly, then, the medieval martyr narratives treat pain differently than do earlier texts. Another important contributor to shifting horizons of expectation has been the work of the Bollandists, an association of historians founded in the seventeenth century with the goal of distinguishing historical from hagiographical writings. If we accept the Bollandists’ claims for the “historical” martyr accounts, our horizon of expectation necessarily shifts and the

tortured bodies that do not feel pain become nonsensical. This chapter traces some of the contours of these different horizons of expectation in order to destabilize modern expectations for pain in martyr texts, thereby making space for alternative ideologies of martyrdom to (re-)emerge.

#### HORIZONS OF EXPECTATION: PAIN AND SUFFERING

As literary products, texts do not reflect real bodies but rather they construct textual bodies.<sup>6</sup> In martyr texts these bodies serve as canvases on which authors inscribe, among other things, faith,<sup>7</sup> masculinity and/or femininity,<sup>8</sup> resistance to hegemony,<sup>9</sup> and pain and suffering.<sup>10</sup> Over the last several decades scholarship has coalesced around an interpretation of martyr texts that privileges the body in pain as a locus of meaning for early Christianity. Representative of this view is Perkins's *The Suffering Self*, in which she claims that "bodily suffering . . . provided Christians with their community identity."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Joyce Salisbury writes: "All the accounts of the martyrs tell of their steadfast witness to the faith in the face of drawn-out painful deaths. It is these accounts that have made readers gasp with sympathy and artists portray the terrible sufferings of the martyrs. . . . Their resilience would not have seemed so miraculous if their ordeals had not been so excruciating."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Susanna Elm argues that martyr texts "are highly constructed narratives that describe in vivid detail bodies in excruciating pain and the eventual torturous death of the sufferer."<sup>13</sup> In all of these interpretations pain—as a result of bodily torture—is understood to be central to the meaning making of martyrdom.

The idea that the meaning of these texts is located in the martyrs' endurance of excruciating pain may persist because modern readers tend to supply pain when we witness physical injury. David Morris tells the story of an American vaudeville actor in the 1920s, Edward H. Gibson, who billed himself as "The Human Pincushion" and capitalized on his inability to feel pain by allowing straight pins to be stuck into his body and face. Eventually he escalated his act by staging his crucifixion. He was forced to stop the show, however—after only one of four spikes was driven into his body—because a woman in the audience fainted. Viewers, Morris argues, put themselves in Gibson's position and imagine the physical sensations they would feel, especially pain, because they cannot imagine a truly impassible existence.<sup>14</sup> He recognizes a similar dissonance between artistic depictions of martyrdom—which often portray martyrs at the moment of their deaths as happy or at least peaceful—and observers' responses to the paintings, which often focus on pain. For instance, Morris argues that when we view the fourteenth-century altarpiece by Antonio Pollaiuolo depicting St. Sebastian suspended in the air while being shot with arrows, "we automatically understand [Sebastian's] experience as painful because we have no other way of thinking about what it means to be shot

full of arrows.”<sup>15</sup> Yet this particular painting—as is typical of artistic representations of martyrdom—includes no overt markers for pain.<sup>16</sup>

Morris’s observation provides helpful avenues for thinking about modern reactions to the narrative constructions of martyrdom in early Christian literature. When confronted with the thick descriptions of the destruction of a martyr’s body, readers imagine the physical sensations such torture would cause and then they make this pain meaningful by associating it with faithfulness and eternal reward. This type of interpretation privileges one moment in martyr texts; however, as the following chapter demonstrates, it neglects another. It represents one understanding of events, but it undervalues important narrative impulses.

Beyond the influence of the reader’s own physical experiences of injury and pain, the centrality of pain in interpretations of martyrdom may be a by-product of a long line of scholarly work that has sought to differentiate fantasy from history, hagiography from fact. The Bollandists—a scholarly society named after their seventeenth-century founder, John Bollandus—embarked on the laborious project of collecting and collating accounts of saints’ lives. In this work they sought to eliminate the most fantastic miracles and thereby to restore texts “to their original integrity.”<sup>17</sup> The focus was largely on retrieving historically accurate accounts from pious embellishment by developing methodologies for an “ecclesiastical science.”<sup>18</sup> Far from wholly dismissing hagiographical materials, the Bollandists accepted as authentic many accounts of miracles while simultaneously seeking to separate the wheat from the chaff by rejecting the “*insulse fabulosa*.”<sup>19</sup> Other scholars, particularly by the late nineteenth century, demonstrate less leniency for the miraculous in their collections of “authentic” martyr texts.<sup>20</sup> E.C.E. Owen’s 1933 collection of martyr texts is representative of this perspective: he instructs readers that to appreciate these early Christian texts they must overcome certain prejudices, chief among them “the impression that the records of martyrdom are full of absurd miracles.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, J. B. Lightfoot argues forcefully for the historical reliability of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* with the exception of 16.1, in which a dove flies out from Polycarp’s side when he is stabbed. This incident—beyond even Lightfoot’s ability to save—is chalked up as an interpolation by that “spurious” “miracle-monger” Pionius.<sup>22</sup>

Concerns about distinguishing hagiography from historiography have largely passed from the scholarly scene, being replaced by literary and sociohistorical readings that focus on the ways texts function within communities.<sup>23</sup> But the most accessible collection of martyr texts—*Acts of the Christian Martyrs*—is based on Herbert Musurillo’s assessment of the texts’ historical reliability.<sup>24</sup> This collection of martyr texts is, furthermore, narrowly conceived: including only twenty-eight texts, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* has perhaps wielded too much influence over literary analyses of martyr literature. Those of us who use Musurillo’s volume are heirs to his assessments of the texts’ historicity, which may affect our readings of

them. Interpretations centered on pain, for example, may stem from assumptions about the texts' historical verisimilitude. That is, while modern analyses of martyr texts that correlate the destruction of the body with the experience of pain may not be driven by interests in historical authenticity, they nevertheless are built upon the texts' historical verisimilitude: the narrative body reacts to torture in ways that mirror the experiences of real bodies.

I argue that it is not self-evident that the martyr texts aim for historical verisimilitude; they may be read instead as asserting God's miraculous intervention at the moment of torture. Looked at this way, what one expects to be painful is miraculously not. Take, for example, the assertion made by the author of the *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius*: "The Lord, fully understanding his servant's faith through the punishments of the prison, would not allow the martyr's tested body to be touched by the slightest laceration of any torment" (20.6).<sup>25</sup> Or similarly, the torture applied to Sanctus's body—described in the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*—did not cause the martyr pain but rather, "Christ enduring in him achieved great glory" (1.23). We will have occasion to examine these accounts more fully in coming chapters, but here they serve to highlight the narrative claims to divine intervention during torture. Rather than narrating excruciating pain, these authors—like Seneca and Lucan—depict the dissolution of the body apart from descriptions of pain. The martyrs' bodies are not then historical or historically verisimilitudinous; they are textual bodies that serve writers' rhetorical and theological aims.

While one legacy of the Bollandists' work is the historicizing of narrative bodies by rejecting miracle as foreign to authentic martyr accounts, interest in humanizing and naturalizing the martyrs' experiences may be traced even earlier than the Bollandists. The ideology linking martyrdom with pain is prevalent in late medieval views of pain as "morally beneficial."<sup>26</sup> This ideology, however, marks a sharp shift from the notion of the impassible martyr, a prominent motif from the earliest Christian martyr texts well into late antiquity.

Distinctions between bodily injury and the experience of pain are present in texts that predate the earliest Christian martyr texts, and such differentiations continue to be a regular part of the Christian martyr traditions well into late antiquity. Not every text makes this distinction, but the impassibility of the martyr is a firmly entrenched element of Jewish and Christian martyr stories. The Hellenistic Jewish text of 4 Maccabees, an important precursor to Christian martyr texts, exemplifies the disassociation between martyrdom and pain. This Jewish Stoic author explains that devout reason masters the passions—namely, anger, fear, and pain (*ponou*)—that stand in the way of manliness (4 Macc 1:4). In his list of the things reason conquers, the author replaces the typical Stoic term "grief" (*lupē*) with "pain" (*ponos*). The story of Eleazar is told as proof that reason "conquers even external pain" (*tōn exōthen algēdonōn epikratei*; 4 Macc 6:34). And the author asserts that

the seven young boys were “contemptuous of the passions” and “complete masters of pain” (*autokratores tōn algēdonōn*; 4 Macc 8:28).<sup>27</sup> 4 Maccabees distances the faithful witness from the somatic experience of persecution by means of reason, which is reached through pious adherence to the Jewish law.

Late ancient homilists also insisted that martyrs did not feel the pain of torture. For instance, in the fourth century John Chrysostom imagines the Maccabean martyrs themselves telling his congregants, “The tortures aren’t burdensome for even a brief flash of time for those whose gaze is fixed on future things and whose eyes are glued to the President of the games.”<sup>28</sup> He makes a similar point in his homily on Julian the Martyr when he explains to his audience that “the things that are naturally burdensome and unbearable become light and easily borne with the hope of future blessings.”<sup>29</sup> In both cases Chrysostom argues that the martyrs’ ability to keep future rewards in mind brought impassivity during torture.

By the thirteenth century we can trace a shift away from impassibility. This change is due in part to a new Christological interest in Jesus’ humanity, which focuses on his experience of pain during the crucifixion.<sup>30</sup> Emphasis on Jesus’ pain at death, Esther Cohen argues, manifests especially in imitative suffering, what she labels “*philopassianism*.”<sup>31</sup> No longer was piety defined by silent endurance of pain; instead, “the public exhibition of suffering became a new virtue. Unless the pain and the wounds were there for all to see, the impact and efficacy of the living saint was lost.”<sup>32</sup> In contradistinction to the early martyr texts, late medieval accounts “came down squarely on the side of the martyrs’ suffering and endurance.”<sup>33</sup> James of Voragine’s thirteenth-century compilation of and commentary on saints’ lives, *The Golden Legend*, exemplifies the transition from early Christian assertions of martyrs’ impassibility to medieval claims of pain in death. Even so, the accounts of martyrdom he collects detail the destruction of the body while simultaneously asserting Christian insensitivity to pain. In one case the virgin martyr Dorothy was placed in hot oil, but being protected by her “spouse Jesu Christ,” she “felt none disease ne harm, but a precious ointment of balm.”<sup>34</sup> Jesus appeared in a vision to an imprisoned Saint Barbara saying, “Barbara . . . doubt not the judge, for I shall be with thee, and I shall deliver thee from all thy pains that any shall make thee suffer.”<sup>35</sup> Several scholars have noted the absence of suffering in these stories.<sup>36</sup> Sherry L. Reames attributes this narrative of non-pain to the book’s emphasis on “the divine mercy which upholds the martyrs during their ordeal, reintegrates their broken bodies after death, and is extended to all the faithful at their tombs.”<sup>37</sup> This divine mercy is given as proof, Reames argues, that “God is on the saint’s side.”<sup>38</sup> Both of the accounts mentioned above credit Jesus with administering analgesia to the faithful martyrs.

While James embedded stories that privilege impassibility, his commentary illustrates a transition to the medieval interest in pain. *The Golden Legend*, Esther Cohen argues, makes earlier martyr texts more usable for medieval Christians by

providing commentaries that downplayed impassibility.<sup>39</sup> For James, then, the ideology of martyrdom centered on sensibility rather than insensibility. Two developments in the Middle Ages contributed to this shift: first was the rise of self-inflicted pain in imitation of Christ. As Cohen observes, “one could not admire and practice the cult of nonsufferers in the thirteenth century when living saints were practicing self-infliction of pain and meditation to imitate Christ’s Passion.”<sup>40</sup> In light of this type of religious devotion, the continued reverence of the church’s saints required a renegotiation of the martyrs’ physical experiences: impassible martyrs are poor models of a piety built upon pain. The second important medieval shift relates to the social and religious meanings attached to the experience of pain in the context of judicial violence. Jurists of the period claimed that impassibility during the application of judicial violence was the result of “evil magic.” The association of impassibility and magic made the traditional stories of the martyrs’ experiences “neither credible nor productive.”<sup>41</sup> In this way religious devotional practice and judicial violence together forced the church to reimagine the martyrs’ experiences. As a result the narrative bodies of the martyrs were rescripted in the late medieval world to serve new communal needs, now focusing squarely on the salvific effect of pain.

Medieval theologians similarly realign the relationship between pain and martyrdom. These authors show little interest in impassibility since they see pain-free existence as an attribute of prelapsarian life on the one hand, and of resurrected bodies on the other, but not of the fallen human condition. According to these theologians, therefore, the martyrs must have felt pain, though they used reason and fortitude to triumph over it. Aquinas, for example, argues for the martyrs’ impassivity, not impassibility: they felt pain but were undisturbed by it.<sup>42</sup> He asserts that “the delight of the contemplation of divine things dulls the sense of pain; hence the martyrs in their passions bore up more bravely by thinking of the divine love.”<sup>43</sup> Aquinas sees this “dullness” as due entirely to God’s grace since “the sensible pain of the body makes one insensible to the spiritual delight of virtue, without the copious assistance of God’s grace, which has more strength to raise the soul to the Divine things in which it delights, than bodily pains have to afflict it.”<sup>44</sup> For Aquinas, the Christian who has the virtue of fortitude may successfully endure pain that would be unbearable to others; this endurance comes from God, however, and not from their own abilities. Medieval Christianity’s changing interests in Christology, martyrdom, and pain culminate in the late medieval period: pain in imitation of Christ eclipses miraculous anesthesia.

Modern horizons of expectation for pain in martyrdom are heirs of this long and influential line of historical, theological, and juridical interests. While the correlation between injury and pain may make sense to modern readers, this interpretation stands in sharp contrast to earlier understandings of the martyrs’ experiences, which as we have seen privilege the body immune to pain.<sup>45</sup> Whereas many

scholars interpret the martyr texts as valorizing pain, Ariel Glucklich has posited an argument about sacred pain that focuses squarely on the narrative interest in impassibility. Appealing to modern medical theories, Glucklich argues that the martyrs experienced a rush of endorphins that caused an anesthetic effect. From this perspective martyrdom triggers “an anesthetizing adrenal rush.”<sup>46</sup> Glucklich also discusses sacred pain in terms of medical research that suggests that individuals who experience physical trauma in situations they deem meaningful—war, for instance—tend to report feeling less (or no) pain at the time of their injuries.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, we might posit a worldview in these texts that places a high value on pain: martyrs, who presumably see their torture as meaningful, benefit from the anesthesia brought by attributing meaning to injury.<sup>48</sup> Judith Perkins makes precisely this claim when she writes that the martyrs understood pain to be “requisite of the initiation experience,” and thus their “thought-world, comprehended and made meaningful the pain, and, therefore, made it bearable.”<sup>49</sup>

While approaching painlessness in martyr texts through medical findings or ritual theory is interesting—and perhaps even compelling from certain standpoints—such an approach does not satisfy my literary interests for two reasons. First, generally speaking, even if the martyrs are historical persons and the texts accurately convey historical events, we do not have direct access to the bodily experiences that are described. We do not, in other words, have first-person accounts of what it feels like to be martyred; we only have access to stories written about the martyrs from the point of view of, in the most generous of readings, observers.<sup>50</sup> Most scholars, however, do not believe these texts derive from eyewitnesses. We are in that case dealing with literary constructions of martyrdom composed by individuals who were writing at some distance in time and space from the actual events. Because of this, interpretations based on medical models are less useful.

Second, when we turn to the depictions of the deaths of early Christians, we find that the narratives do not reflect on the meaningfulness of pain, but rather they describe the martyrs’ deaths without betraying any interest in pain whatsoever. The early martyr texts do not suggest that the martyrs felt pain and considered it redeeming; they construct a death without pain. Rather than constructing an identity that privileges pain, these texts subvert both the persecutors’ and the audience’s expectations of the relationship of bodies, torture, and pain. To appreciate fully the subversive claims inherent in these texts, we must separate categories that are typically collapsed in discourses about martyrdom: torture and suffering, injury and pain. It is true that the martyr accounts portray the body being beaten, scraped, clawed, burned, and otherwise attacked. However, they simultaneously deny that the tortured body suffers; they reject that this injured Christian feels pain. The conflation of these categories can obscure our appreciation of the texts’ subversive messages about Christian bodies at the hands of Roman authorities.

### *What Is Pain?*

Exploring the ways pain functions in stories of Christian martyrs necessitates a definition: What *is* pain? But perhaps the question seems obtuse, its answer obvious. Pain is “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage,” according to the International Association for the Study of Pain.<sup>51</sup> This functional definition will resonate with many modern readers, but it fails to define what pain *is* exactly. Indeed, that question has occupied philosophers and scientists from antiquity until now, and satisfactory answers that account for the spectrum of types of pain and different cultural and personal experiences of pain remain largely elusive. Although a history of pain is beyond the scope of my study, it will be helpful to identify some key moments in the discourse about pain in order to isolate a particular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century model that may—along with the cultural shifts I have already described—inform modern assumptions about pain.

Since the late nineteenth century, the medical profession has articulated the theory that pain is the result of signals sent through nerves from a site of injury to the brain.<sup>52</sup> Ronald Melzack and Patrick D. Wall, two of the most important researchers on pain in recent years, observe, “The link between pain and injury seems so obvious that it is widely believed that pain is always the result of physical damage and that the intensity of pain we feel is proportional to the severity of the injury.”<sup>53</sup> It is perhaps because we are heirs of this understanding of pain that we read a text about the torture of a body as one that necessarily includes pain as a locus of meaning. Since we believe, for instance, that being burned at the stake hurts—because we understand there are nerve signals that travel through the body to the brain—we interpret the story of Polycarp being burned alive as, at least in part, a story about the pain endured by the saint. But this seemingly commonsense link between injury and pain is not necessarily the case from a biological, cultural, or literary perspective.

Contemporary studies of pain demonstrate that models positing pain-as-injury oversimplify lived experiences. Take, for instance, an experience unique to amputees, phantom limb pain. In these cases physical trauma to the body results in a complex experience: it is not the site of amputation that hurts, but some portion or activity of the absent limb itself.<sup>54</sup> Thus pain is not merely the result of electrical impulses that travel from a site of injury to the brain. Allan I. Basbaum, whose research focuses on the neurological basis of pain, writes about another diagnosis that complicates understandings of pain: pain asymbolia, a syndrome “in which patients with cortical damage report, with absolutely no emotion, that intense stimuli are excruciatingly painful.”<sup>55</sup> Patients with this syndrome observe that a stimulus hurts, but they have no emotional investment in the experience; they do not *appear* to be in pain. Basbaum observes, “seconds after reporting how unbearable the pain is, they quietly go back to reading a newspaper or doing some

other activity with not the slightest signs of distress.”<sup>56</sup> What, in this situation, is pain? Who is the arbiter of the experience? This issue becomes even more complicated when we move from direct observation, like Basbaum’s study, to highly mediated texts with complicated transmission histories. And it becomes yet more complicated when we move from the report of painful stimuli—without emotional reaction to it—to a story of no pain at all.

To further understand the roots of modern understandings of pain, we might consider the report Col. Henry K. Beecher published in 1946, in which he observes, “There is a common belief that wounds are inevitably associated with pain and, further, that the more extensive the wound, the worse the pain.”<sup>57</sup> Beecher’s experience with wounded soldiers suggests this belief is incorrect: he estimates that the expected relationship between injury and pain obtains in only about 25 percent of cases. Beecher questioned 215 men, all of whom had severe wounds, who were “clear mentally” and who were not in shock at the time they were interviewed: 32.1 percent of the men reported they had no pain; 25.6 percent had “slight pain”; 18.6 percent had “moderate pain”; and 23.7 percent had “bad pain.”<sup>58</sup> In these cases the expectation that injury will lead to pain is disconfirmed. Injury, it seems, does not always trigger the experience of pain.

Another aspect of the complexity of lived pain is the commonly made distinction between emotional pain—which may not correlate to an identifiable site of physical injury—and physical pain. “Grief,” for instance, is emotional, while “pain” is physical.<sup>59</sup> Morris labels this division the “Myth of Two Pains” and argues that physical pain is not categorically different from emotional or psychological pain.<sup>60</sup> That physical and emotional pain cannot be clearly differentiated is reflected in the definition of pain articulated by the International Association for the Study of Pain: it is a “sensory and emotional experience.” Neurological studies, furthermore, have suggested that the same areas of the brain are engaged both in the experience of physical pain and in situations of social or romantic rejection. This suggests that the brain processes the events similarly.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, feelings of empathy for another person in pain trigger neurological responses similar to the experience of pain itself.<sup>62</sup> Depression, moreover, can manifest as physical pain, including joint pain, back pain, and limb pain—in addition to a number of other physical problems.<sup>63</sup> Thus contemporary science disrupts the clear-cut distinctions that are commonly made between physical and mental pain.<sup>64</sup>

My aim in discussing the limitations of commonly held modern beliefs about pain is not to posit that the martyrs felt no discomfort when they were flogged, burned, or stretched on the rack. This book makes no argument about historical bodies and their experiences of torture. Rather I wish to problematize the assumption that narratives about bodily torture are necessarily narratives about pain. On the one hand, this assumption is grounded in the historicity of the texts (or at least in beliefs about their historical verisimilitude), rather than in narrative, rhetoric,

or theology; and on the other hand, it oversimplifies the complex lived realities of pain. Perhaps more pertinent for this book is the observation that pain-as-injury has not always been the most obvious understanding of pain.

Many modern discussions of pain-as-injury fail to recognize the varying personal or cultural meanings associated with pain. David Morris sees the articulation of this scientific model—nerve pathways moving from the site of injury—as a watershed moment in the movement away from assigning meaning to pain. Anatomical and physiological breakthroughs in the nineteenth century, he argues, “created the scientific basis for believing that pain was owing simply to the stimulation of specific nerve pathways.”<sup>65</sup> Rather than signifying meaning, pain became a symptom of injury.

Examples abound of culturally determined experiences of pain, instances in which an act is performed that—in the injury-pain model—should cause physical pain but, within a specific cultural context, is not reported as painful. The hook-hanging ritual once practiced in parts of India is a frequently cited example.<sup>66</sup> After participating in various rites of ritual cleansing, a chosen man was declared temporarily divine. The village carpenter inserted two steel hooks into this man’s back, from which he was suspended above a cart. From this elevated position the man blessed both children and crops. One anthropologist reported that the man displayed “no trace of pain” but instead appeared to be in a “state of exaltation.”<sup>67</sup>

In other instances it is the experience of pain—not its absence—that signifies the spiritual realm. Pain, for instance, may be interpreted as divine punishment, as when Eliphaz argues that Job’s pain has divine origins: “For He inflicts pain, and he gives relief; he wounds, and his hands heal” (Job 5:18). Similarly, Genesis 3:16 attributes pain in childbirth to divine punishment: God says to the woman, “I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” Within the narrative world created by this text, pain is not merely the consequence of contracting uterine muscles—as the modern scientific model would argue—but is a divinely ordained punishment that serves as a reminder of faithlessness and transgression. Pain is not biological but cosmic.<sup>68</sup>

Modern readers might dismiss arguments for the divine origin of pain as explanatory strategies for phenomena people did not otherwise understand. But interpreting labor pain as divine punishment was common even into the nineteenth century in arguments against using anesthesia in childbirth.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the growing popularity of anesthesia in a number of medical applications raised concerns about science undermining divine will. At the twelfth meeting of the American Dental Association held in 1872, for instance, a Dr. Atkinson rejected the use of anesthesia during dental procedures on theological grounds: “I wish there were no such thing as *anaesthesia*; I am against these satanic agencies which prevent men from going through what God intended them to go through.”<sup>70</sup> At times, therefore, individuals interpret pain as signifying divine action rather than merely nerve stimulation.

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers also indicate that pain is not “simply and entirely a medical problem,” and ancient texts attest to a wide range of explanations for pain and painlessness, not all of which are associated with bodily injury.<sup>71</sup> Aristotle discusses pain not as a physical sense—like taste, smell, and sight—but as an emotion, like joy. It is a “passion.”<sup>72</sup> For Aristotle, in other words, pain is not a physical sensation that results from bodily injury; it is instead a mental or emotional response to an event.<sup>73</sup> And Seneca, as Catharine Edwards explains, uses pain as “an analogy for mental weakness”; the brave man can defeat pain through reason.<sup>74</sup> In this case pain is not simply the result of nerve stimulation but must instead be a “movement”—in Stoic terms—that can be avoided by the will. In a passage with which the authors of the Christian martyr texts could certainly have agreed, Seneca urges his reader to think of the man

who did not stop smiling, even when the smile itself so enraged his torturers that they applied to him every instrument of their barbarity. If pain [*dolor*] can be vanquished by a smile, will it not be defeated by reason? You may mention now whatever you wish—colds, continuous hard coughing that bring up parts of our innards, fever that dries up our entrails, thirst, limbs so bent that the joints stick out in opposite directions; worse than these are the raging flame, the rack, the metal plates, the instrument that recreates wounds while the wounds themselves are still swollen and drives the impression deeper. Nevertheless, there have been some who have not groaned through these things. . . . Are you willing, after this, to laugh at pain [*dolorem*]? (*Ep.* 78.18–19)

As with his description of Hippolytus with which this chapter began, so also here Seneca employs thick description—“parts of our innards”—to activate the audience’s expectation of pain. The images of physical trauma, and the descriptions of the instruments that bring trauma, heighten the audience’s anticipation of a narrative focusing on excruciating pain. Seneca, again, rejects the audience’s expectations, insisting that pain can be defeated by reason. If wisdom brings anesthesia, lack of reason accounts for pain. Far from having a universal meaning, therefore, discourses of pain are culturally situated.

### *What Is Suffering?*

Although scholars who write about pain and suffering in martyr texts do not typically define these terms, the pairing appears to reflect a Cartesian dualism in which “pain” is a corporeal experience while “suffering” is largely emotional or psychological. But this differentiation is at odds with many ancient medical and philosophical positions. The separation of physical from emotional pain seems to make sense today, Thomas Dormandy suggests, because we have had success in treating the acute pain of surgery and lagged in treating mental illness. But, he argues, this dualism would have made no sense in antiquity.<sup>75</sup> Medical theories based on the

humors, for instance, tend to equate the two types of pain. Lisa Wayne Smith, discussing early modern humoral theory, writes, “As revealed by pain vocabulary, men and women understood the workings of their humoral bodies similarly; emotions were indivisible from corporeal sensations, with patients’ fear framing their physical experiences.”<sup>76</sup> The distinction is equally problematic for earlier periods. Although Plato may have posited a mind/body dichotomy, as Abraham P. Bos has shown, it was not widely accepted.<sup>77</sup> Many early Christian writings in fact reflect the belief that the soul is a corporeal entity that participates in the experience of pain.<sup>78</sup> Tertullian, for example, imagines the soul to be susceptible to punishment and suffering in hell (*An.* 7.4). And Augustine argues that “pain is the soul’s, not the body’s, even when the cause of its pain proceeds from the body, when its pain is in a place where the body is injured” (*City of God* 21.3). Christian arguments about the corporeality of the soul destabilize the distinction between physical and emotional suffering.

Interpreters’ tendencies to differentiate physical and emotional experiences may be seen in their translations of key terms in the Christian martyr texts: *algeō/paschō* and *doleo/patior*. The first term of each set is typically—though not always—translated “pain.” Of greater interest are the second terms in each pairing: *paschō* and *patior*. Both of these are weighty terms in Christian discourse, and the typical English translation, “to suffer,” carries connotations that do not fully represent the Greek and Latin semantic ranges.<sup>79</sup> In current English usage, “suffering” usually implies a negative physical or emotional experience akin to “pain,” though perhaps of the emotional variety. The examples in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, however, indicate that *patior* was not typically used as synonym of *dolor*; that is, it does not regularly refer to sense perception. Rather, the semantic range of *patior*, like *paschō*, encompasses meanings from “endure” and “undergo” to “afflicted,” “allow,” or “submit to.” Both terms are antonyms of verbs of free action. These words, therefore, are closer to the modern English verb “to endure” than they are to the ways we tend to employ the term “to suffer” in everyday speech. Although both *patior* and *paschō* are often translated “to suffer,” then, they do not refer to physical sensations but instead to one’s stance vis-à-vis a particular event: they describe the strategy of one who is being acted upon in some (typically negative) manner.<sup>80</sup> While the translation is not as smooth as the traditional rendering, in what follows I prefer translating *paschō* and *patior* along the lines of “having gone through the events” or “having endured what was happening” as a way of bringing to the forefront the differences between these terms and the terms employed in situations where physical pain is clearly in focus (in which case the terms of choice are most often *algeō* and *doleo*).

The arguments in this book attend to a constellation of markers of pain. The authors of the martyr texts make their arguments about martyred bodies in part by employing—or avoiding—particular terminology. But the texts also convey pain

and painlessness through their narrative descriptions of the martyrs' bodies, feelings, and actions; on occasion the martyrs' experiences are contrasted with non-Christians' experiences, which also engage in the discourse of pain and painlessness. The authors of these texts, in other words, utilize a variety of narrative techniques to distance the martyr's body from the physical sensation of torture.

### *Pain and Imitatio Christi*

Modern readers and ancient audiences come to martyr texts with different horizons of expectation around genre, pain, and suffering; yet another difference may be the ways martyrs imitate Christ. When scholars focus on pain in martyr texts, they often do so on the basis of Christological assumptions: pain is a locus of meaning in the texts because the martyrs imitate Jesus who endured pain. Susanna Elm, for instance, writes, "Jesus' extremely painful death and subsequent resurrection provided a divinely inspired model of enduring and thereby alleviating pain."<sup>81</sup> Karen King suggests, "The martyrs' deaths are often represented as imitations of the suffering and death of Christ."<sup>82</sup> And Judith Perkins asks why Christians "picked the suffering in their founder's life to emulate."<sup>83</sup> But on the one hand, explicit imitation of Jesus' pain is less prevalent in the early martyr texts than we may assume. And on the other hand, some texts go so far as to differentiate the unique death of Jesus—and its salvific effects—from the deaths of the martyrs. Privileging pain as the central element of imitation leads us not only to undervalue the narrative motif of impassibility, but also to overlook ways the martyrs might imitate aspects of Jesus' life apart from his painful death. I agree then that the martyr texts employ motifs of *imitatio Christi*, but I understand the *content* of the imitation differently.

It is certainly the case that some early martyr texts invoke *imitatio Christi*. In the second-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for instance, the author holds up Polycarp as one who imitated the Lord (1.2). This text, however, never uses pain language: neither Jesus nor the martyrs are said to have been in pain. Polycarp's imitation, therefore, is not in his endurance of pain but—the author makes clear—in his "waiting to be handed over" (1.2). The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, furthermore, differentiates Christians' deaths from Jesus' by reserving the term *paschō* for Jesus alone: Jesus "endures" (*paschō*) for the salvation of the world (17.2). But *paschō* is negated when used of Polycarp: "as if enduring nothing" (*hōs ouden peponthōs*; 8.3). The martyr may be physically injured, but he does not "endure" as Jesus did.<sup>84</sup>

The *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* also invokes *imitatio* imagery. The author of this third-century text explains that a sudden rainstorm appeared at the moment of Flavian's death so that "water might unite with blood in imitation [*exemplo*] of the Lord's passion" (22.3). In this case the author shows that aspects of Flavian's death parallel Jesus' and adduces them as proof of the martyr's worth in the eyes of God. But as we shall see in later chapters, this text is unwavering in

its claim that Flavian's *imitatio* does not include pain. These examples illustrate that one could imitate Jesus through obedient waiting or through divinely ordained parallels, but they do not necessitate, or even imply, sharing the experience of pain. *Imitatio Christi*, therefore, may be present as a narrative interest apart from the discourse of pain.

That Jesus experienced pain during his death, it is also worth noting, is not clear in the canonical Gospels.<sup>85</sup> Although Jesus' pain has become central to both Christology and soteriology, the evangelists do not explicitly stipulate pain as Jesus' experience in crucifixion. Then again, neither do the canonical passion narratives explicitly deny Jesus' pain.<sup>86</sup> They simply do not make it a key locus of meaning. We might assume the crucifixion would be painful, but some of the early church fathers deny exactly this. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, rejects the idea that Jesus' death was painful.<sup>87</sup> The nature of Jesus' body prevented him from feeling physical pain. Hilary writes, "When he absorbed a blow, or when a wound pierced him, or when ropes bound him, or when he was raised up and suspended, he felt the force [*inpetum*] of the passion, but not the pain [*dolorem*] of it."<sup>88</sup> Other authors argued the opposite side of the issue—that Jesus *did* feel pain (we would certainly expect such a position in any anti-docetic writings<sup>89</sup>). But we must not assume that the early martyr stories draw on traditions of Jesus' pain. An ancient hearer may well have drawn connections between Jesus' experience—even one of pain—and the experience of a martyr whose story was being recited, but as we shall see in more detail later, an interpretation based on the imitation of pain becomes harder to sustain when we carefully observe the texts' rhetorical techniques for rejecting pain.

While pain is certainly a complex phenomenon, both biological and cultural models demonstrate that it is not always understood as a necessary corollary to injury. When, in the following chapters, the narrative perspective on pain takes center stage, this observation becomes even clearer. Early Christian martyr texts employ a wide variety of techniques by which they signal the immunity or insensitivity of the Christian body to the painful effects of torture. Audiences both modern and ancient may assume that the experiences depicted in the narratives are painful, but this interpretive move runs counter to the narrative goals themselves. Furthermore, we must suspend precisely this impulse—to supply the experience of pain—if we are to appreciate the nuances of the narrative construction of a pain-free death, of a death detached "from the agonies of dying."<sup>90</sup>