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Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture

KAREN HALTTUNEN

"IT IS GRIEVOUS TO SEE OR HEAR (and almost to hear of) any man, or even any animal whatever, in *torment*." With these words in 1724, William Wollaston captured the culture of sensibility that was emerging in eighteenth-century England, a new set of attitudes and emotional conventions at the heart of which was a sympathetic concern for the pain and suffering of other sentient beings. Shaped by John Locke's psychology of sensation and by the moral-sense philosophy of his followers, the cult of sensibility took for its hero "the man of feeling," whose tender-hearted susceptibility to the torments of others was the mark of his deeply virtuous nature. The culture of sensibility steadily broadened the arena within which humanitarian feeling was encouraged to operate, extending compassion to animals and to previously despised types of persons including slaves, criminals, and the insane and generating a reformist critique of forms of cruelty that had once gone unquestioned. As part of a broader "reformation of manners" reshaping English social (and especially male) behavior in this period, the culture of sensibility even contributed to a long-term decline in the incidence of casual criminal violence. In the context of the bourgeois "civilizing process," compassion and a reluctance to inflict pain became identified as distinctively *civilized* emotions, while cruelty was labeled as *savage* or *barbarous*.¹

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¹ [William Wollaston], *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (London, 1724), 139. For discussions of the emergence of the new humanitarian sensibility, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York, 1983); G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992); and Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), chap. 10. On the "civilizing process," see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, Edmund Jephcott, trans. (New York, 1978); Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, chap. 3; Pieter Spierenburg, *The Broken Spell: A Cultural and Anthropological History of Preindustrial Europe* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991); John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York, 1990). On the decline of casual criminal violence, see Lawrence Stone, "Interpersonal Violence in English Society 1300–1980," *Past and Present*, 101 (November 1983): 22–; Ted Robert Gurr, "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A

The new humanitarian sensibility revolutionized the meaning of pain in Anglo-American culture. "Pain," as David B. Morris has observed, "is always historical—always reshaped by a particular time, place, culture." Orthodox Christianity had traditionally viewed pain not only as God's punishment for sin (the English term is derived from the Latin *poena*, punishment) but also as a redemptive opportunity to transcend the world and the flesh by imitating the suffering Christ. "Preatesthetic cultures responded to pain not with denial but with curious forms of affirmation" that were rooted in a pre-modern acceptance of the inescapability of pain.² The eighteenth-century cult of sensibility redefined pain as unacceptable and indeed eradicable and thus opened the door to a new revulsion from pain, which, though later regarded as "instinctive" or "natural," has in fact proved to be distinctly modern.³ This essay addresses a phenomenon closely related to this emergent revulsion from pain: the pornography of pain, which represented pain as obscenely titillating precisely because the humanitarian sensibility deemed it unacceptable, taboo. The modern pornography of pain taking shape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not merely a seamy sideline to humanitarian reform literature but rather an integral aspect of the humanitarian sensibility.

THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS of the humanitarian sensibility lay with the Latitudinarian divines of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In reaction to English Puritanism and to the secular Calvinism of Thomas Hobbes, the Latitudinarians argued that human nature is instinctively sympathetic, naturally inclined to virtuous actions because of the pleasurable feelings such actions generate. God had "implanted in our very Frame and Make a compassionate Sense of the Sufferings and Misfortunes of other People, which disposes us to contribute to their Relief."⁴ The Latitudinarian tradition exerted an important

Critical Review of the Evidence," *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, 3 (1981): 295–353; → J. M. Beattie, "The Pattern of Crime in England 1660–1800," *Past and Present*, 62 (February 1974): 47–95; Spierenburg, *Broken Spell*, chap. 7. According to political theorist Judith N. Shklar, the Enlightenment involved a shift in value structures that placed cruelty first among the "ordinary vices" (as opposed to the traditional seven deadly sins) that define the modern moral universe, and thus generated a critique of traditional political, moral, and religious systems on the grounds of their own fundamental cruelty; see Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); for an application of her thesis to American Christianity, → Ava Chamberlain, "The Theology of Cruelty: A New Look at the Rise of Arminianism in Eighteenth-Century New England," *Harvard Theological Review*, 85 (1992): 335–56.

² David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 6, 48. Also see John Kirkup, "Surgery before General Anaesthesia," in *The History of the Management of Pain: From Early Principles to Present Practice*, Ronald D. Mann, ed. (Carnforth, Lancashire, 1988), 23, 28.

³ See James Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore, Md., 1980).

⁴ Richard Fiddes, *Fifty-Two Practical Discourses on Several Subjects* (1720), quoted in Ronald S. Crane, "Suggestions toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling,'" *Journal of English Literary History*, 1 (1934): 205–30. Crane remains the best authority on the Latitudinarian origins of the cult of sensibility. Although his argument has been challenged → Donald Greene, "Latitudinarianism and Sensibility: The Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling' Reconsidered," *Modern Philology*, 75 (1977): 159–83, and by

→ Chester Chapin, "Shaftesbury and the Man of Feeling," *Modern Philology*, 81 (1983): 47–50, Crane's position has been effectively defended by Frans de Bruyn in "Latitudinarianism and Its Importance

influence on the third earl of Shaftesbury, who learned from John Locke the importance of sensation to knowledge but diverged from his tutor by positing an innate “moral sense,” more akin to intuition than to reason, capable of distinguishing good from evil through an instinctive grasp of the beauty of virtue, and inclined to the good through innate sympathy.⁵ The philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment developed further Shaftesbury’s views on human benevolence, finding in sensibility the best way to counteract the perils of rampant self-interest and preserve moral community in a rapidly commercializing society. David Hume asserted that morality “is more properly felt than judg’d of” and human nature so constructed that “virtue is distinguished by the pleasure, and vice by the pain, that any action, sentiment or character gives us by the mere view and contemplation.” Similarly, Francis Hutcheson posited a “sense of the soul we may call the *sympathetick*” such that “when we see or know the pain, distress, or misery of any kind which another suffers, and turn our thoughts to it, we feel a strong sense of pity, and a great proneness to relieve, where no contrary passion withholds us.”⁶ (See Figure 1.)

Influenced by Locke’s understanding of the primacy of vision among the senses, eighteenth-century moral philosophers treated sympathy as a sentiment stirred primarily through sight. “For when we see a miserable Object, Nature it self moves our Bowels to compassion,” wrote Latitudinarian divine Zacheus Isham in 1700; and Hume and Hutcheson, as quoted above, assumed this visual emphasis.⁷ The

as a Precursor of Sensibility,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 80 (1981): 349–68. For an excellent overview of the emergence of the new ethic of benevolence, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966), 348–64.

⁵ For discussions of the origin of the “moral sense,” see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1960), chap. 2; and John K. Sheriff, *The Good-Natured Man: The Evolution of a Moral Ideal, 1660–1800* (University, Ala., 1982), chap. 1. On the earl of Shaftesbury, see Basil Willey, *The English Moralists* (London, 1964), chap. 14; Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (New York, 1940), chap. 4; Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London, 1986), chap. 2; and John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988), chap. 1.

⁶ On the Scottish Enlightenment, see John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987); Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1945); *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, R. H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner, eds. (Edinburgh, 1982); *A Hotbed of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment 1730–1790*, David Daiches, Peter Jones, and Jean Jones, eds. (Edinburgh, 1986). David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Welby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford, 1978), Book 3, Section 2, 470 and 475. Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), in *Four Early Works on Motivation*, Paul McReynolds, ed. (Gainesville, Fla., 1969), 131–32.

On sentimental neurophysiology, which treated “sympathy” as an organic sensitivity structured into the nervous system, see G. S. Rousseau, “Nerves, Spirits and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility,” in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, Papers Presented at the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar, Canberra, 1966 (Toronto, 1968), 137–57; John Mullan, “Hypochondria and Hysteria: Sensibility and the Physicians,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 25 (1984): 141–74; Christopher Lawrence, “The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment,” Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin, eds., *Natural Order: Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* (Beverly Hills, Calif., 1979), 19–39; Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, chap. 1. Also see Norman Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976): 195–218.

⁷ Z. Isham, *A Sermon* (1700), quoted in Crane, “Suggestions toward a Genealogy,” 225, emphasis added. Locke thought of sensory impressions as pictures: although he affirmed that simple ideas of sensation come in through all the senses, he believed that “only sight is significant for the understanding faculty, for thought is seeing”; Tuveson, *Imagination as a Means of Grace*, 21. Barbara

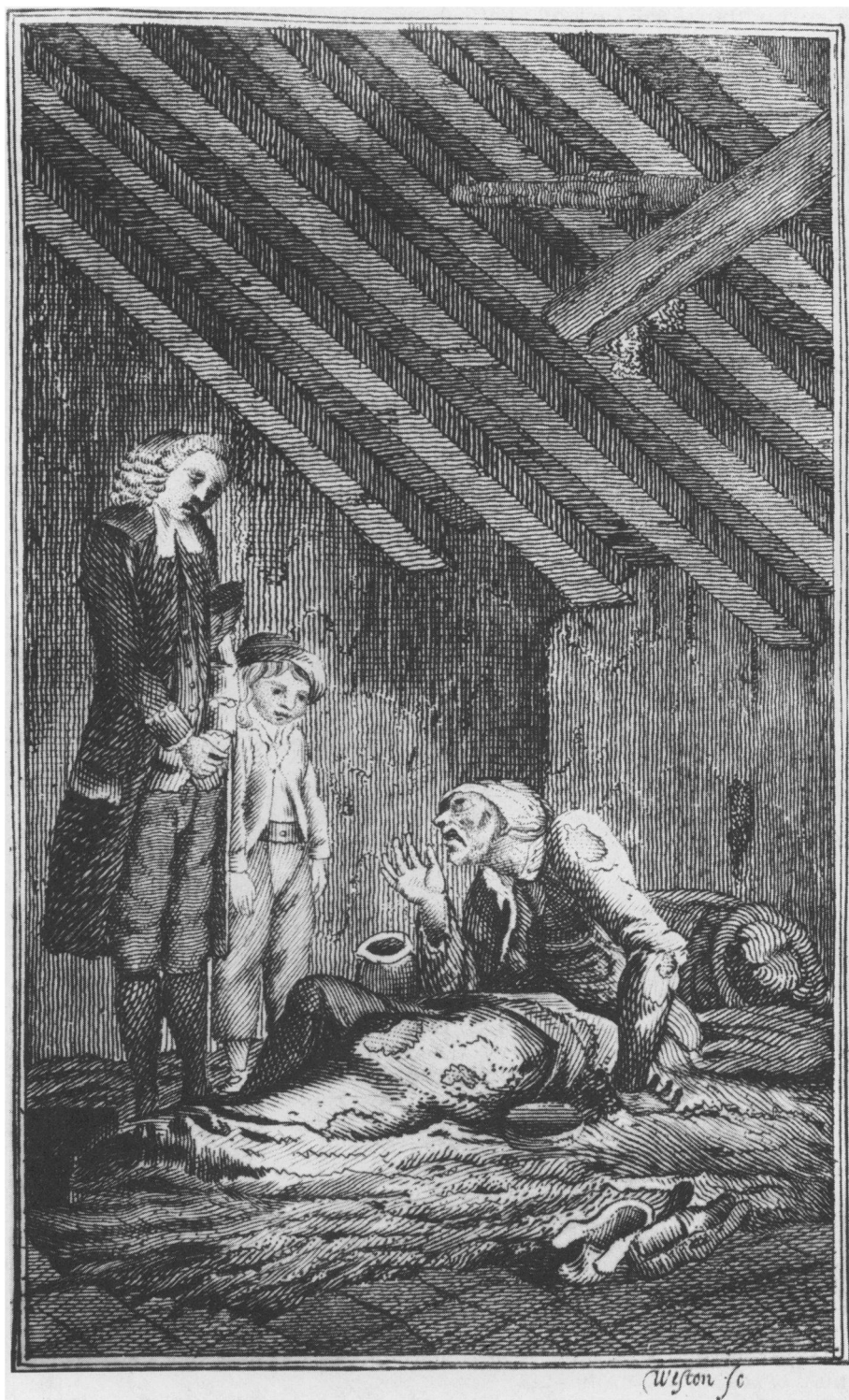


FIGURE 1. The sentimental scenario of suffering: the curate and little Charles extend virtuous sympathy to an impoverished inebriate dying of consumption. Rev. C. G. Salzmann, *Elements of Morality, for the Use of Children; With an Introductory Address to Parents*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1796), vol. 1, plate 5, between 108 and 109. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

spectatorial nature of sympathy was most fully developed by Hutcheson's student and successor at the University of Glasgow, Adam Smith, who learned from Hume and Hutcheson to treat ethics as a matter of sentiment, sentiment as a matter of sympathy, and sympathy as a matter of spectatorship. Smith's man of virtue feels sympathy by first seeing the sufferings of another, either in reality or in his mind's eye, and then exercising his imagination in an effort to enter into those sufferings: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them."⁸

The concept of spectatorial sympathy was instrumental in shaping the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility, a substantial body of English novels, plays, and poems that proved an important medium for popularizing the basic tenets of sentimental ethics. Sentimental art undertook to teach virtue by softening the heart and eliciting tears of tender sympathy, an aim reinforced by eighteenth-century art criticism, which emphasized emotional response rather than rational judgment as the proper criterion for evaluation. Sentimental art offered tableau after tableau of pitiful suffering—scenes of poverty, imprisonment, slavery, the aftermath of war, tormented animals, women in distress—all aimed at arousing readers' spectatorial sympathy and thus enhancing (and demonstrating) their virtue. In sentimental drama, which had the advantage of appealing literally to spectators, emotional tableaux took precedence over narrative coherence, and center stage was held less by active heroes than by passively suffering female victims, who used body language and gesture to communicate emotion and evoke the sympathetic response. Sentimental poetry aimed to teach the feeling heart a correct response in works such as "On Seeing an Officer's Widow Distracted, Who Had Been Driven to Despair by a Long and Fruitless Solicitation for the Arrears of Her Pension." Sentimental painting also specialized in the scenario of suffering, as in William Redmore Bigg, *A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* (1780) and Francis Wheatley, *John Howard Visiting and Relieving the Miseries of Prison* (1787).⁹

Maria Stafford has explored the eighteenth-century "tendency to collapse all sensory experience into the visual" in *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 28. William Wollaston wrote, "One can scarce know the sufferings of another without having at least some image of them in his mind . . . Next to suffering itself is to carry the representation of it about with one"; *Religion of Nature Delineated*, 139.

⁸ John Dwyer refers to Smith's "principle of spectatorial sympathy" in *Virtuous Discourse*, 53. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, eds. (Oxford, 1976), 9. On the distinctions among the views of "sympathy" held by Shaftesbury, Hume, Hutcheson, and Smith, see Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, chap. 1.

⁹ On sentimental literature and art, see Todd, *Sensibility*; R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London, 1974); Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*; Louis I. Bredvold, *The Natural History of Sensibility* (Detroit, Mich., 1962); Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, chap. 6; J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (London, 1932), esp. chap. 3. Most useful for an understanding of the spectacle of suffering in sentimental literature is Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge, 1993). The poem on the "Officer's Widow" is cited in Todd, *Sensibility*, 60. On the visual arts, see David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn., 1993), esp. chap. 5.

The convention of spectatorial sympathy at the core of the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility was deeply ambivalent in its treatment of the pain and suffering of other sentient beings. Sentimental sympathy was said to be a “dear delicious pain,” “a sort of pleasing Anguish”—an emotional experience that liberally mingled pleasure with vicarious pain. By the last decades of the century, what critic Anna Laetitia Barbauld called the “exquisite pleasure” of spectatorial sympathy was generating serious doubts about the underlying virtue of its exercise.¹⁰ Avid readers of sentimental fiction fell under suspicion of moral passivity and even hypocrisy: Oliver Goldsmith ridiculed sentimentalists for weeping over the sufferings of helpless animals even as they consumed at dinner the flesh of six different creatures in a single fricassee. Other critics focused on the sentimentalists’ alleged habit of quickly turning from others’ misery to contemplate their own sensations: John Keats and William Hazlitt would soon charge that the poetry of sensibility actually explored not the feelings of the imagined sufferer but the feelings of the spectator watching that sufferer and was geared to demonstrating the spectator/reader’s own exquisite sensibility. Wrote Barbauld, “we take upon ourselves this burden of adscititious sorrows, in order to feast upon the consciousness of our own virtue.”¹¹

But the most serious contemporary indictment of sentimentalism, which emerged fully in the last decades of the eighteenth century, concerned its alleged sadism. William Godwin called sensibility a “moon-struck madness, hunting after torture,” and an essay in *The Watchman* (1796) agreed, saying of the sentimental reader, “She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werther and Clementina.”¹² Between its early appearance in the 1740s and the last decades of the century, sentimental literature did grow steadily more self-indulgent in stimulating artificial emotional excitement. But the sadistic proclivities of the genre were present from the beginning. Samuel Richardson’s early sentimental masterpieces, *Pamela* (1740–41) and *Clarissa* (1747–48), were heavy with sexual victimization, psychological torture, and a sadistic voyeurism that would eventually appeal to the marquis de Sade, who reveled in the prolonged torment and rape of Clarissa and based his novel *Justine* (1791) on the perils of Pamela.¹³ The literary scenario of suffering, which made

¹⁰ “Delicious pain” is from William Wordsworth, “Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress,” in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth: Poems Written in Youth; Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood*, E. de Selincourt, ed. (Oxford, 1940), 269; “pleasing Anguish” is Scottish moralist David Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1754), quoted in Crane, “Suggestions toward a Genealogy,” 205; “exquisite pleasure” is Barbauld, “An Inquiry into Those Kinds of Distress Which Excite Agreeable Sensations:—With a Tale” (1773), in *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, With a Memoir by Lucy Aikin*, 2 vols. (London, 1825), 2: 228.

¹¹ Goldsmith’s fricassee is cited in Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, 504; on the critical views of Keats and Hazlitt, see Todd, *Sensibility*, 143; Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “On Romances: An Imitation” (1773), in *Works of Barbauld*, 2: 174. Barbauld referred here to a contemporary critical position that was not her own.

¹² Godwin and *The Watchman* are quoted in Todd, *Sensibility*, 139, 141.

¹³ On the connections between Sade and English sentimentalism (especially the works of Richardson), see Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Angus Davidson, trans., 2d edn. (Oxford, 1970), chap. 3; Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, part 2, chaps. 1 and 5; Todd, *Sensibility*, chaps. 5 and 8; Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility*, chap. 4. Voyeurism, as Lennard J. Davis has observed, was essential to the novel’s “private world-made-public” evidenced, for example, in the suggestion that *Pamela* invites the reader to peer into a young woman’s private (and most distressed) correspondence; see Davis, *Factual*

ethics a matter of viewing the pain of another, from the outset lent itself to an aggressive kind of voyeurism in which the spectator identified not just with the sufferings of the virtuous victim but with the cruelty of her or his tormentor. Pleasure mixed with pain, and pain with pleasure, in an eighteenth-century culture of sensibility intensely preoccupied with both.

G. J. Barker-Benfield offers a useful social-historical explanation of the pleasures of spectatorial sympathy. "Transcendence of long-standing forms of the suffering brought about by natural and human causes preceded the widespread expression of the refined kind of suffering that preoccupied cultivators of sensibility."¹⁴ He points to the slowdown in the rate of population growth, the increasing production of food, relative price stability and rising real wages, the disappearance of the plague, the end to civil wars, a dramatic increase in English wealth, and the growing accessibility of consumer luxuries to the expanding middle classes in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as evidence of a growing distance from suffering in the experience of many English people.¹⁵ Following Daniel Defoe's lead in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Barker-Benfield characterizes the eighteenth-century English middle classes in terms of their consciousness of a new distance from physical discomfort. That consciousness, he argues, explains the delights of spectatorial sympathy. As the aptly named *Spectator* observed in 1712, "when we read of torments, wounds, deaths and the like dismal accidents, our pleasure does not flow so properly from the grief which such melancholy description gives us, as from the secret comparison which we make between ourselves and the person who suffers. Such representations teach us to set a just value upon our own condition, and make us prize our good fortune, which exempts us from the like calamities."¹⁶ Although spectatorial sympathy claimed to demolish social distance, it actually rested on social distance—a distance reinforced, in sentimental art, by the interposition of written text, stage, or canvas between the virtuous spectator and the (imaginary) suffering victim. As Edmund Burke explained, even though immediate pain or danger are "simply terrible . . . at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful."¹⁷

The increasing middle-class sensitivity to pain contributed to the late eighteenth-century intensification of medical efforts to discover an effective form of anesthesia. Traditionally, Western medicine had joined with orthodox Christianity in regarding pain as inevitable. Medicine had tended to discourage efforts to interfere with pain on the grounds that suffering was a vital part of the body's natural healing process. In the eighteenth century, however, physicians and

Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel (New York, 1983), 189, and esp. chap. 3. The history of the visual arts also suggests the expansion of the voyeuristic motif since the sixteenth century; see Mirjam Westen, "The Woman on a Swing and the Sensuous Voyeur: Passion and Voyeurism in French Rococo," in *From Sappho to De Sade: Moments in the History of Sexuality*, Jan Bremmer, ed. (London, 1989), 69–83.

¹⁴ Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, xx.

¹⁵ For a similar treatment, see Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, chap. 3.

¹⁶ Quoted in Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 62–63.

¹⁷ [Edmund Burke], *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757), 14, emphasis added.

surgeons grew more sensitive to the pain they inflicted on their patients, until, “By the 1750s, the man of feeling had truly entered the operating room.”¹⁸ The medical establishment began a systematic search for a painless surgical technique, beginning with Joseph Priestley’s discovery of nitrous oxide gas in 1773 and culminating in Boston dentist William T. G. Morton’s successful administration of ether anesthesia to a surgical patient at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1846. What one medical historian has called the “pre-anaesthetic era” (1754–1846) also saw efforts to alleviate surgical pain by refrigeration techniques, nerve compression, hypnosis, subcutaneous injection of morphine (first isolated in 1806), controlled asphyxia, and drastic bleeding to the point of syncope just before operating. In the early eighteenth century, the term “anesthesia” had referred to a defective lack of feeling; by the end of the century, it had come to connote a “positive medical relieving of feeling, a blessing rather than a defect.”¹⁹ By 1845, the American patent medicine business had discovered (and to some extent helped create) a lucrative national market for general pain cures, with Perry Davis’s registering of the trademark for his “Celebrated Pain Killer,” which promised to treat not disease but pain itself.²⁰

THE SEARCH FOR SURGICAL ANESTHESIA both reflected and reinforced what James Turner has called “that dread of pain—that ‘instinctive’ revulsion from the physical suffering even of others,” which has in fact proved to be “uniquely characteristic of the modern era.” The modern sensitivity to the very thought of pain was well expressed by British antivivisectionist Frances Power Cobbe: “The infliction of pain is a thing naturally so revolting to the cultivated mind, that any description of it inevitably arouses strong sentiments of dislike, if not of horror.” Turner argues that, while the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility marked the beginnings of the transition from a traditional view of pain as unavoidable to a modern sense of pain as loathsome and unacceptable, it was only in the nineteenth century that the new distaste for pain achieved the level of full revulsion and horror. But the growing “obsession with pain”²¹ that he documents was clearly at work shaping a wide range of popular literature, fictional and

¹⁸ Steven Bruhm, “Aesthetics and Anesthetics at the Revolution,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 32 (Fall 1993): 403. Bruhm cites the story of surgeon William Cheselden (1688–1752), who experienced nausea the night before he operated at the prospect of the pain he was going to inflict; see n. 8, 403.

¹⁹ Bruhm, “Aesthetics and Anesthetics,” 404.

²⁰ See F. F. Cartwright, *The English Pioneers of Anaesthesia* (Beddoes, Davy, and Hickman) (Bristol, 1952); M. H. Armstrong Davison, *The Evolution of Anaesthesia* (Baltimore, Md., 1965), which surveys the “pre-anaesthetic era,” 73–96; James E. Eckenhoff, *Anesthesia from Colonial Times: A History of Anesthesia at the University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1966); Martin S. Pernick, *A Calculus of Suffering: Pain, Professionalism, and Anesthesia in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1985). Daniel de Moulin challenges the notion that pain has been experienced more acutely since the eighteenth century but nonetheless concedes “a rapidly dwindling readiness to accept pain” in the modern period; see Moulin, “A Historical-Phenomenological Study of Bodily Pain in Western Man,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 48 (1974): 540–70, quote 569.

²¹ See Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 80, xii. On 79, he quotes Frances Power Cobbe, “The Rights of Man and the Claims of Brutes”; see her *Studies New and Old of Ethical and Social Subjects* (Boston, 1866), 220. Dr. Valentine Mott used the term “instinctive aversion to pain” in *Pain and Anaesthetics: An Essay, Introductory to a Series of Surgical and Medical Monographs* (prepared by request of the Sanitary Commission) (Washington, D.C., 1862), 5.

nonfictional, in the last decades of the eighteenth century—a literature that fully expressed the new view of pain as loathsome and revolting, a source of moral horror.

The most obvious example of a new literary genre geared to the exploration of the horror of pain was Gothic fiction, an offshoot and close relation to sentimental fiction that had emerged with the publication of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764 and by the last decades of the century become one of the most popular genres in both England and the United States. Gothic fiction embodied Burke's aesthetic theory of the sublime and beautiful, first published in 1756: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger . . . is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."²² Pain and danger were abundantly present in such Gothic works as William Beckford's novel *Vathek* (1786), Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), and Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Over time, the genre shifted from the gloomy but veiled terrors of earlier works toward the ever-cruder and more lurid representations of violence at work in the *Schauer-Romantik* school, exemplified by Matthew Lewis's famous novel *The Monk* (1796), which reveled in scenes of rape, torture, and charnel-house corruption and decay. Gothic fiction in general showed a predilection for scenes of torture—sometimes setting them in the historical context of the Inquisition—and for sexual violation and murder, treating such subjects in a manner calculated to arouse maximum revulsion and disgust.²³ Its treatment of torture closely linked pain with beauty and cruelty with sexual desire, articulating an erotic sensibility that helps explain de Sade's admiration for "Monk" Lewis's work. That erotic sensibility exerted a powerful influence on English Romanticism from the late eighteenth century through the Decadents. The literature of "Romantic agony" carried forward the Gothic exploration of that mysterious bond between pleasure and suffering that Maturin called "delicious agony."²⁴

"So strangely was the mind of man constructed," observed Daniel Webster in closing for the prosecution at a murder trial, "that pleasure could be gathered from the elements of pain, and beauty seen in the Gorgon head of horror." The renowned attorney thus revealed the impact of the Romantic agony on a different form of literary expression: the nonfictional accounts of murder in America.²⁵ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the early American execution

²² [Burke], *Philosophical Enquiry*, 13.

²³ For general discussions of Gothic fiction, see *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, G. R. Thompson, ed. (Pullman, Wash., 1974); Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York, 1979); David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London, 1980); Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (1957; rpt. edn., Metuchen, N.J., 1987); James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (New York, 1985). On the Gothic novel in America, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986), chap. 8; and Donald A. Ringe, *American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Lexington, Ky., 1982).

²⁴ See Praz, *Romantic Agony*; Philip P. Hallie, "Horror and the Paradox of Cruelty" (Middletown, Conn., 1969); Lowry Nelson, Jr., "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel," *Yale Review*, 52 (1962): 236–57 (Maturin is quoted on 238).

²⁵ Webster's speech was recorded in the *Trial of George Crowninshield, J. J. Knapp, Jun. and John Francis Knapp, for the Murder of Capt. Joseph White . . .* (Boston, 1830), 93. White had been clubbed and stabbed to death in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1830. Webster's reference to the Gorgon reflects the Romantic agony's fascination with the beauty of the Medusa, emblem of human agony and mortal corruption; see Praz, *Romantic Agony*, chap. 1.

sermon, which had focused not on the crime of murder but on the state of the condemned criminal's soul just before the execution, was gradually replaced by a variety of new genres—trial reports, criminal biographies and autobiographies, journalistic accounts of the crime, and detection narratives—whose central concern was with the murder itself.²⁶ The popular account of murder became increasingly visual in its treatment of the violence of the crime, offering detailed verbal descriptions sometimes accompanied by illustrations, labeling murder a “bloody spectacle,” a “shocking scene.”²⁷ Readers were expressly invited to envision the murder in question, to reconstruct it imaginatively in their mind's eye, to watch the violence unfold (see Figure 2). And their attention was directed to the carnage of the scene, the wounds inflicted, the sufferings of the victim, the state of the corpse, in language calculated to evoke readers' horror even as it testified to their presumed fascination with such shocking bloodshed. Similar concerns shaped nonfictional murder narratives in England, and, in both England and the United States, bloody murder became a prominent concern in popular fiction.²⁸

Both Gothic fiction and the popular accounts of murder exemplified a broader literary trend in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that was captured in the neologism “sensationalism.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest usage of the term “sensation” as “an excited or violent feeling” or “the production of violent emotion as an aim in works of literature or art” was in 1779.²⁹ Over time, the term increasingly lent itself to what was perceived to be a degraded commercial tendency to pander to public excitement in the face of particularly terrible or shocking events, to what William Wordsworth in 1801 characterized as a “craving for extraordinary incident” and “a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation.” Wordsworth attributed the phenomenon to urbanization and modern information technology, which were intensifying the popular desire to be shocked or thrilled so long as the beholder could remain safe (an explanation that would support the Barker-Benfield thesis). Within fifty years of Wordsworth's lament, the English periodical *Punch* was blaming the very term “sensation” on the Americans, specifically on American journalism, with its heavy reliance on steamboat explosions, train wrecks, and horrid murders to sell

²⁶ See Karen Halttunen, “Early American Murder Narratives: The Birth of Horror,” in *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History*, Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds. (Chicago, 1993), 67–101; Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674–1860* (New York, 1993), esp. chaps. 8–9; David Ray Papke, *Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work, and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830–1900* (Hamden, Conn., 1987), chaps. 2. → Daniel E. Williams, “‘Behold a Tragick Scene Strangely Changed into a Theater of Mercy’: The Structure and Significance of Criminal Conversion Narratives in Early New England,” *American Quarterly*, 38 (Winter 1986): 827–47.

²⁷ William B. Sprague, *Wicked Men Ensnared by Themselves . . .* (Springfield [Mass.], 1826), 41; *The Trial of Alpheus Livermore and Samuel Angier . . .* (Boston, 1813), 36 (the actual quote is “shocking scenes”).

²⁸ See Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (New York, 1970), chaps. 1–5; David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860: A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1957); and Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel 1830–1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray* (Detroit, Mich., 1963).

²⁹ The first usage cited in the *OED* of the term “sensationalism” meaning “addiction to what is sensational in literature or art” is from 1865. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d edn., vol. 14 (Oxford, 1991), 976.



FIGURE 2. Sensationalistic violence: Michael McGarvey, Philadelphia carter, flogs his wife to death with a leather whip, having tied her to the bedpost by her hair (1828). The apparently passive spectatorship of the woman in the doorway underlines the voyeuristic quality of this print. *Tragedies on the Land, Containing an Authentic Account of the Most Awful Murders That Have Been Committed in This Country . . . Embellished with Numerous Spirited Engravings* (Philadelphia, 1841), 149. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

newspapers to a readership with an insatiable hunger for “sensationalist” shocks and thrills.³⁰ The American penny press was certainly a major expression of the new taste for sensation; in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), Charles Dickens tellingly satirized the New York papers as the *New York Stabber* and the *New York Sewer*. But there were others. Captivity narratives and their literary successors the dime novels, the popular “mysteries of the city” genre, historical works on the Inquisition (see Figure 3), the literature of “counter-subversion” produced by social opponents of Mormonism, Masonry, and Catholicism, the semi-sociological literature of exposé, which purported to unveil the evils of mental institutions and prisons, all were sensationalistic in nature; all appealed to a popular voyeuristic taste for scenarios of suffering. “Reader,” wrote James Brice in *Secrets of the Mount-Pleasant State Prison*, “if you could but once witness a state prison flogging. The victim is stripped naked and beaten with a cruel instrument of torture called a cat, from his neck to his heels, until as raw as a piece of beef.”³¹

³⁰ See Richard D. Altick, *Deadly Encounters: Two Victorian Sensations* (Philadelphia, 1986), 4–6; William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *Lyrical Ballads*, R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, eds. (Edinburgh, 1963), 243.

³¹ James R. Brice, Esq., *Secrets of the Mount-Pleasant State Prison, Revealed and Exposed . . .* (Albany, N.Y., 1839), 69; also see *Astounding Disclosures! Three Years in a Mad-house, By a Victim, Written by Himself*

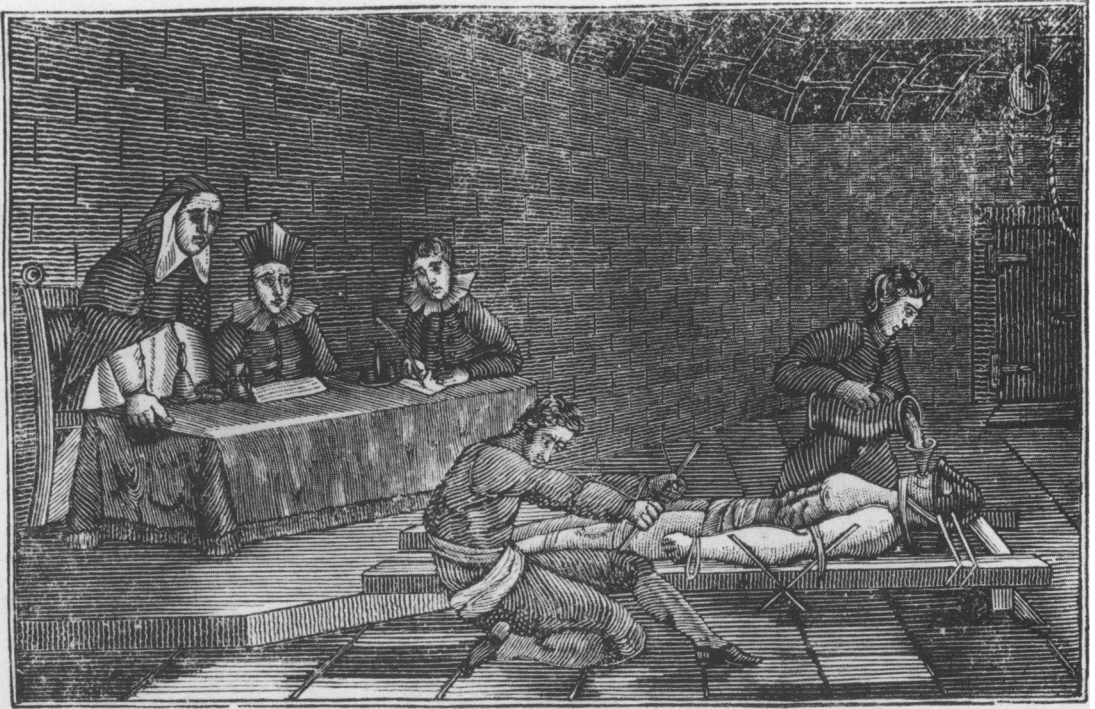


FIGURE 3. The historical interest in torture: agents of the Inquisition administer the “torture of the rack, also called that of water and ropes” to a prisoner in the presence of ecclesiastical spectators. Rev. Cyrus Mason, *A History of the Holy Catholic Inquisition, Compiled from Various Authors* (Philadelphia, 1835), 156, 157. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Perhaps most revealing, a growing predilection for scenarios of suffering was, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, becoming increasingly central to pornography *qua* pornography. Traditional English erotica had been dominated by bawdy, an innocent and unself-conscious kind of sexual writing, especially attentive to themes of cuckoldry and scatology, which tended to treat sex as an uncomplicated animal act and a source of ribald humor. But in the second half of the seventeenth century, English booksellers and printers began to import and translate from French and Italian a more modern kind of sexual writing, pornography, which was designed to arouse lust and encourage the

... (n.p., 1852); and *The Mysteries of Bedlam; or, Annals of the Madhouse* . . . (Philadelphia, n.d.). On the asylum exposé literature, see Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789–1865* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1964), chap. 9. For discussions of sensationalism, see Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (New York, 1989); David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York, 1988); Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, N.J., 1980); Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York, 1985). On specific manifestations of sensationalism, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, 1977); Roy Harvey Pearce, “The Significance of the Captivity Narrative,” *American Literature*, 19 (March 1947): 1–20; Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1987); David Brion Davis, “Some Themes of Countersubversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature,” in Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), 9–22.

creation of sexual fantasies.³² As Peter Wagner has usefully defined it, pornography was “the written or visual presentation in a realistic form of any genital or sexual behaviour with a deliberate violation of existing and widely accepted moral and social taboos.”³³ Not until the eighteenth century did those taboos include, on any significant scale, the infliction of pain.

Sexual flagellation apparently interested few readers and authors before the eighteenth century. In 1718, Edmund Curll published an English translation of a Latin medical work, *A Treatise of the Use of Flogging in Venereal Affairs*. By the 1730s, the respectable *Gentleman's Magazine* was including some essays and letters on the art of flogging, and, when John Cleland proffered up his tale of *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–49), he included a scene of mutual flagellation between Fanny and Mr. Barville. The flagellation mania significantly increased in the late eighteenth century (along with a new interest in amorous strangulation)—just at the time the marquis de Sade was producing his works associating torture and murder with sexual arousal, which would earn him the distinction of having his name assigned to the genre.³⁴ The pornography of sadism entered its heyday in the nineteenth century, when “the English vice” became the central convention of English pornography. In such works as *The Rodiad* (c. 1820) and *The Merry Order of St. Bridget* (1868), various combinations of sexes and (often ambiguous, due to cross-dressing and role-playing) genders participated in the flagellation mania (see Figures 4 and 5).³⁵ From its earliest

³² See Roger Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene, and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century* (Totowa, N.J., 1979); David Foxon, *Libertine Literature in England 1660–1745*, reprinted with revisions from *The Book Collector* (1963) (London, 1964); *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*, Lynn Hunt, ed. (New York, 1993); Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York, 1988). David O. Frantz, who tries to date English “pornography” to the Renaissance, admits that English examples were rare in contrast to Italian Renaissance pornography and that bawdy remained dominant; see Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus, Ohio, 1989), esp. chap. 6.

³³ Peter Wagner, *Eros Revived: Erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America* (London, 1988), 7.

³⁴ Wagner, *Eros Revived*, chap. 3. Pisanus Fraxi [Henry Spencer Ashbee], the pseudonymous Victorian bibliographer of pornography, tried to blame the growing English popularity of “sodomachistic” pornography on the Frenchman’s evil influence: “It is obvious that modern authors have allowed themselves to be influenced by the harmful, blood-thirsty and unnatural doctrines of the Marquis de Sade, and have imitated the cynicism, cruelty and the unspeakable lasciviousness which are a characteristic feature of his works, and which, it must be admitted, he handled with masterly skill”; quoted in Ivan Bloch, *Sexual Life in England Past and Present* (London, 1958), 445. Such an explanation fails to account for either the incipient interest in flagellation that preceded the marquis’s writings or the receptivity of an English readership to de Sade’s sexual tastes, and neglects as well to register the influence on de Sade of some English literature, notably the sentimental works of Richardson and the Gothic fiction of Matthew “Monk” Lewis.

³⁵ On the nineteenth-century literature in general and its gender ambiguity in particular, see Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1966; New York, 1985), esp. chap. 6. Also see Ian Gibson, *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After* (London, 1978); and Antony E. Simpson, “Vulnerability and the Age of Female Consent: Legal Innovation and Its Effect on Prosecutions for Rape in Eighteenth-Century London,” *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, eds. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), 181–205. The American erotic novel *Mary Velnet* (1816) featured a nude woman tortured on a rack, while *Venus in Boston* (1849) depicted a Negro procuress stripping and whipping a young maiden; see Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 221. Until the mid-nineteenth century, there was little indigenous American pornography: the Americans largely contented themselves with importing and sometimes reprinting English and, to a lesser degree, Continental European erotica; see Wagner, *Eros Revived*, chap. 9. For brief discussions of American pornography



FIGURE 4. The pornography of pain: a lady flagellant flourishes her birch in the frontis illustration of *The Romance of Chastisement; or, Revelations of the School and Bedroom: By an Expert* (Boston, 1876). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



FIGURE 5. The pornography of pain: “St. Edmund, Bishop of Canterbury, while studying at Paris, was tormented by a very beautiful young woman: summoning her to his study, he administered such a Flagellation that her body was covered with weals.” William M. Cooper [James Glass Bertram], *Flagellation and the Flagellants: A History of the Rod in All Countries from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London, 1877), plate 9, opposite p. 134. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

appearance, **the pornography of pain was highly voyeuristic in nature**, dependent not only on the implied spectatorship of the reader/viewer but also on the express spectatorship of internal **witnesses to the sexual infliction of pain**. The spectacle of suffering—which had first emerged from moral philosophy, found its full articulation in sentimental literature and art, then assumed increasingly sadistic forms in popular sensationalism—became the dominant convention of sexual pornography by the early nineteenth century.

Steven Marcus’s loosely psychoanalytic explanation of the vogue of sadomasochistic pornography attributes different scenarios to distinct sexual problems and pathologies. The typical scenario of the large, mannish woman flagellating a man wearing a skirt Marcus explains as “a kind of last-ditch compromise with and

before 1860, see Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 211–24; and Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York, 1992), chaps. 6–7.

defense against homosexuality.”³⁶ But the scenario of the large and powerful male Turk flogging and raping a helpless female virgin, which Marcus identifies as the dominant representation of “male [hetero]sexuality” in nineteenth and twentieth-century pornography, he attributes to the last-ditch expression of an increasingly outmoded form of aggressive manhood.³⁷ From a broader and more historical perspective, the key to both these pornographic expressions is changing attitudes toward pain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. If pornography is best defined as the representation of sexual behavior with a deliberate violation of moral and social taboos, then the growing violence of pornography in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is attributable to the new shock value of pain within a culture redefining it as forbidden and therefore obscene.

DURING THIS PERIOD, the cultural meaning of pain was undergoing a significant transition centered on the emergence of a new pornography of pain: a heightened awareness of the close relationship between the revulsion and the excitement aroused by pain. A widening range of intellectual and literary expressions revealed a powerful fascination with pain and a growing predilection for scenarios of suffering that were not necessarily constrained by the eighteenth-century sentimental convention of spectatorial sympathy. Throughout the eighteenth century, humanitarian reform had played a major causal role in this cultural reconstruction of pain, identifying a range of formerly unquestioned social practices as unacceptable cruelties and demanding that virtuous people, men and women of sensibility, endeavor to put a stop to such practices. In so doing, humanitarian reformers contributed to the new repugnance and disgust in the face of pain and quickly became mired in the same moral problems of representing the scenario of suffering that had plagued sentimental literature. Anglo-American humanitarianism first appeared in a culture of sensation, which assigned great importance to the role of the senses, and developed within a culture of sensationalism, which tended to treat pain as alluring, exciting, and ultimately obscene. The emergent

³⁶ Marcus's argument here is circular: he suggests that the audience for such works was “clearly limited . . . to those men to whom this perversion appealed”; *Other Victorians*, 253, 260. Such a position fails to account for the overwhelming dominance of flagellation literature in nineteenth-century English pornography. Marcus inadvertently places himself in a historical tradition of identifying flagellation as the peculiar taste of such various subgroups as Puritan clergymen, nuns and monks (especially Capuchins), prostitutes, old men, and even stepmothers; for a historical discussion of these shifting subgroups, see Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears*, chaps. 4, 5, 8; for a nineteenth-century example of such identifications, see William M. Cooper [James Glass Bertram]'s slyly prurient *Flagellation and the Flagellants: A History of the Rod in All Countries from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London, 1877). Other efforts to explain the nineteenth-century vogue of sadism point to the influence of public school disciplinary practices; see Gibson, *English Vice*, chaps. 2–3 (Gibson also attempts a psychoanalytic explanation of flagellomania in chap. 8); and Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (London, 1969), chap. 7.

³⁷ Marcus, *Other Victorians*, 211–12. I agree with Marcus's suggestion that the increasing attention to sadistic heterosexuality in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century pornography may be attributable in part to the emergent middle-class ideal of romantic love: cruel sex may have entered obscene literature in part because of the new normative requirement of tender sex within the companionate marriage. On this point, see Wagner, *Eros Revived*, conclusion; and Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago, 1980).

pornography of pain became a troubling moral dilemma within the literature of humanitarian reform.

Anglo-American humanitarian reformers were deeply concerned about pain and opposed to its willful infliction in a wide range of social practices. Among the earliest beneficiaries of the new vogue for compassion were animals, as humanitarians began to call for an end to animal abuse, including such blood sports as cock fighting and cock throwing, bull and bear baiting, and stag hunting.³⁸ The early modern “spectacle of suffering,” the public infliction of pain or death on the bodies of criminal offenders, came under critique and was gradually replaced with the penitentiary system.³⁹ The brutal treatment of the insane was challenged by a new generation of asylum keepers who worked to replace the physical coercions and heroic medical procedures of traditional “terrific” mental healing with “moral treatment” based on the humanitarian conviction that the insane were not immune to physical suffering but were entitled to the same benevolent sympathy as the rest of humanity: practitioners of the new moral therapy were expected to exhibit “a sympathising distress at moral pain, a strong desire to remove it.”⁴⁰ The violent punitive practices of the armed services (English reformers focused on the army, Americans on the navy) came under growing criticism on the grounds that flogging was “a disreputable, cowardly, unmanly, unfeeling, brutal, inhuman and bloody mode of punishment.”⁴¹ The corporal

³⁸ See Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*; Myra C. Glenn, *Campaigns against Corporal Punishment: Prisoners, Sailors, Women, and Children in Antebellum America* (Albany, N.Y., 1984); Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*; Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1973), esp. chaps. 3 and 7; Richard D. French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science in Victorian Society* (Princeton, N.J., 1975); *Vivisection in Historical Perspective*, Nicolaas A. Rupke, ed. (London, 1987).

³⁹ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York, 1977); Pieter Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering: Executions and the Evolution of Repression; From a Preindustrial Metropolis to the European Experience* (Cambridge, 1984); Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York, 1978); J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England 1660–1800* (Princeton, N.J., 1986); Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1830–1914* (Cambridge, 1990), chap. 3; David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971); Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution and the Transformation of Authority in Philadelphia, 1760–1835* (Chapel Hill, forthcoming, 1996); David Brion Davis, “The Movement to Abolish Capital Punishment in America, 1787–1861,” in Davis, *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 17–40; Louis P. Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776–1865* (New York, 1989).

⁴⁰ Anne Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine: A Study of the York Retreat, 1796–1914* (Cambridge, 1985); *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, Andrew Scull, ed. (Philadelphia, 1981); Scull, “Humanitarianism or Control? Some Observations on the Historiography of Anglo-American Psychiatry,” in *Humanitarianism or Control? A Symposium on Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Social Reform in Britain and America*, Martin J. Wiener, ed., *Rice University Studies*, 67 (Winter 1981): 21–41; Mary Ann Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness: Early American Attitudes and Treatment of the Insane* (Hanover, N.H., 1987); Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* (New York, 1973); Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*; Nancy Tomes, *A Generous Confidence: Thomas Story Kirkbride and the Art of Asylum-Keeping, 1840–1883* (Cambridge, 1984). The term “terrific” was applied to older therapies, as contrasted with the “mild means” of moral treatment, by Samuel Tuke, grandson of the founder of the York Retreat: see his *Description of the Retreat, an Institution near York for Insane Persons of the Society of Friends*, Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine, intro. (London, 1964), 148. The passage on “sympathising distress” is in J. C. Bucknill and D. H. Tuke, *A Manual of Psychological Medicine* (1858), quoted in Digby, *Madness, Morality and Medicine*, 61. Traditional treatment of the mentally ill was probably harsher in England than in early America; see Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness*; and Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, chap. 1.

⁴¹ The quoted passage is from an anti-flogging petition to Parliament in 1834; quoted → J. R. Dinwiddy, “The Early Nineteenth-Century Campaign against Flogging in the Army,” *English Historical*

punishment of children began to fall into disfavor among liberal Lockean and Romantics.⁴² War, dueling, prize fighting, even “football” (a term covering a wide range of games in which serious wounds, broken bones, and occasional deaths occurred) were all objects of reform concern.⁴³

The literature of humanitarian reform targeted illicit cruelty by offering graphic treatments of its practice. When Richard Henry Dana, Jr., devoted a chapter of *Two Years before the Mast* (1840) to the floggings of two fellow seamen on board the brig *Pilgrim*, and when Harriet Beecher Stowe accepted her Sunday-morning vision of the fatal flogging of Uncle Tom as the starting point for her epic antislavery novel (1851–52), both authors were writing within a well-established reform convention. Throughout reform literature, a wide range of victims—including British soldiers, American sailors, schoolboys, convicts, the insane, and African slaves—were endlessly flogged: bound or chained, stripped to the waist, and whipped until the blood poured down and pieces of flesh flew, and the victims writhed with pain, cried out for relief, and sometimes fainted or died (see Figures 6 and 7). Within these representations, the victims’ extreme pain was an important focal point: “While under the lash, the bleeding [slave] victim writhes in agony, convulsed with torture.” British soldiers who were flogged reported that “the sensation experienced at each lash was as though the talons of a hawk were tearing the flesh off their bones.”⁴⁴

Review, 97 (April 1982): 317. Also → Myra C. Glenn, “The Naval Reform Campaign against Flogging: A Case Study in Changing Attitudes toward Corporal Punishment, 1830–1850,” *American Quarterly*, 35 (Fall 1983): 408–25; Glenn, *Campaigns against Corporal Punishment*, chaps. 2 and 5; Harold D. Langley, *Social Reform in the United States Navy, 1798–1862* (Urbana, Ill., 1967), chaps. 6–7.

⁴² → J. H. Plumb, “The New World of Children in Eighteenth Century England,” *Past and Present*, 67 (1975): 64–95; Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (Cambridge, 1982); Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 1993), chap. 1; Donald R. Raichle, “The Abolition of Corporal Punishment in New Jersey Schools,” in *Corporal Punishment in American Education: Readings in History, Practice, and Alternatives*, Irwin A. Hyman and James H. Wise, eds. (Philadelphia, 1979), 62–88.

⁴³ Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973); Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States, from the Colonial Era to the First World War* (Princeton, N.J., 1968); Donna T. Andrew, “The Code of Honour and Its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England, 1700–1850,” *Social History*, 5 (October 1980): 409–34; Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society*, esp. chaps. 3 and 7; Spierenburg, *Broken Spell*, chap. 7; Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, 1986). Myra Glenn, *Campaigns against Corporal Punishment*, explores the connections among a range of movements against the corporal punishment of children, sailors, prisoners, *et al.*, and reformist opposition to capital punishment, war, dueling, cruelty to animals, and slavery. Randall McGowen’s work on England is particularly useful for understanding the larger transition “from a society that celebrated the public infliction of pain to a society whose members withdrew in horror from the spectacle of suffering”; → McGowen, “The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of Modern History*, 59 (December 1987): 651–79, quote on 653; a → “Civilizing Punishment: The End of the Public Execution in England,” *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (July 1994): 257–82. On the extreme sensitivity to personal suffering within American perfectionist reform, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York, 1965), chap. 6; a → John L. Thomas, “Romantic Reform in America, 1815–1865,” *American Quarterly*, 17 (Winter 1965): 656–81. For a discussion of the historical significance of the new “humanitarian narrative” of the body in pain, see Thomas W. Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, Lynn Hunt, ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 176–204.

⁴⁴ The Rev. Horace Moulton, in *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* [Theodore Dwight Weld, comp.] (New York, 1839), 20; Henry C. Wright, *Defensive War Proved to Be a Denial of Christianity and of the Government of God: With Illustrative Facts and Anecdotes* (London, 1846), 174.

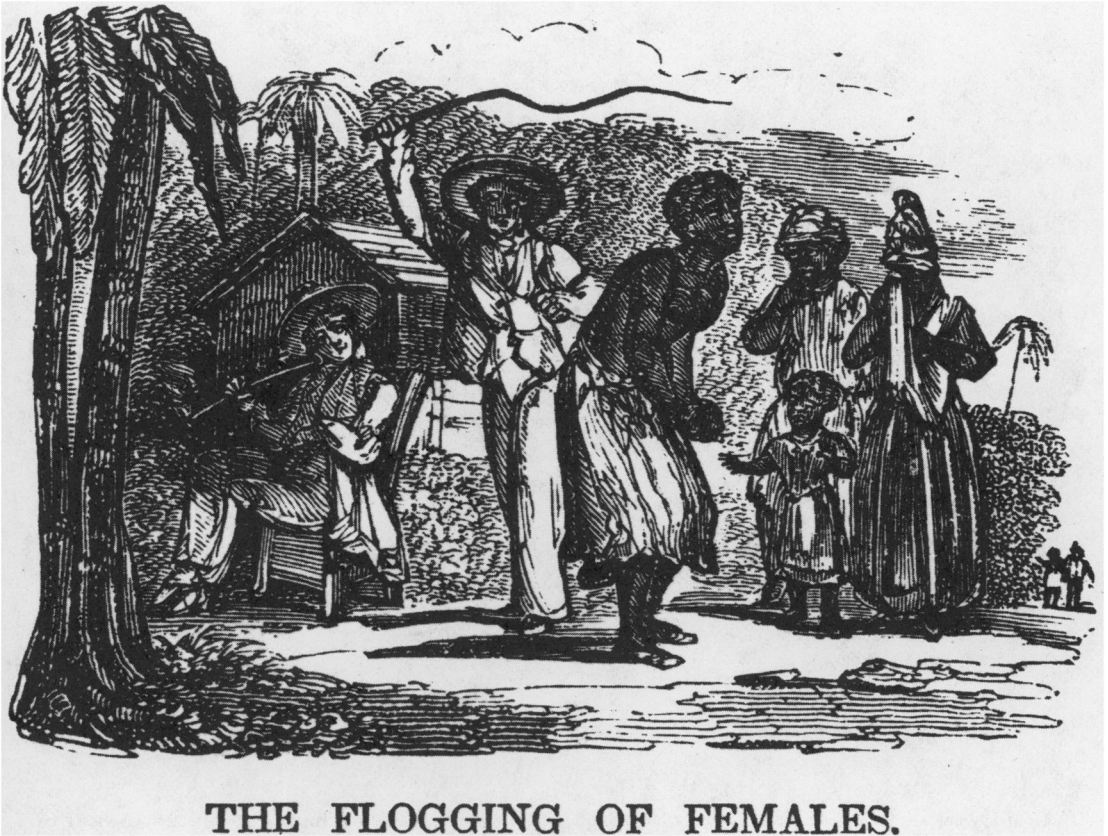


FIGURE 6. The humanitarian spectacle of pain: a white man flogs a half-naked slave woman. The African-American spectators evince the proper response of sentimental sympathy and distress at her suffering, while the single white spectator betrays callous indifference to, if not barbaric pleasure in, her exposure and pain. *The Anti-Slavery Record* I, no. 10 (October 1835): 109. Courtesy of the Newberry Library.

Beyond flagellation, reformers often selected out cases of unusual cruelty to illustrate the evils of the institution in question. English opponents of the slave trade, for example, cited use of thumbscrews, roasting in an iron coffin, and burning alive to depict the torments of enslaved Africans.⁴⁵ The index of Theodore Dwight Weld's compilation *American Slavery as It Is* (1839) clearly demonstrates that project's focus on torture: A is for Arbitrary power, cruelty of, B is for Branding with hot iron, C is for Chopping of slaves piecemeal, D is for Dislocation of bones, E is for Ear-cropping. A naval reformer focused his critique not on common disciplinary flogging but on the case of sailor Henry Burr on the American ship *Caravan*, who was first beaten and flogged by the captain and mate, then pricked all over his body with a sail needle until he died of his injuries, in what was designated "a torture worthy of the inquisition."⁴⁶ This analogy

⁴⁵ See John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (London, 1788), 17; Thomas Cooper, *Letters on the Slave Trade* (Manchester, 1787), 18; John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, 3d edn. (London, 1774), 14. On Wesley's enlistment of images of sadistic torture, see Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 359.

⁴⁶ *American Slavery as It Is*, 210, 211, 212, 213; William McNally, *Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed: With Proposals for Their Remedy and Redress* (Boston, 1839), 140. Also see

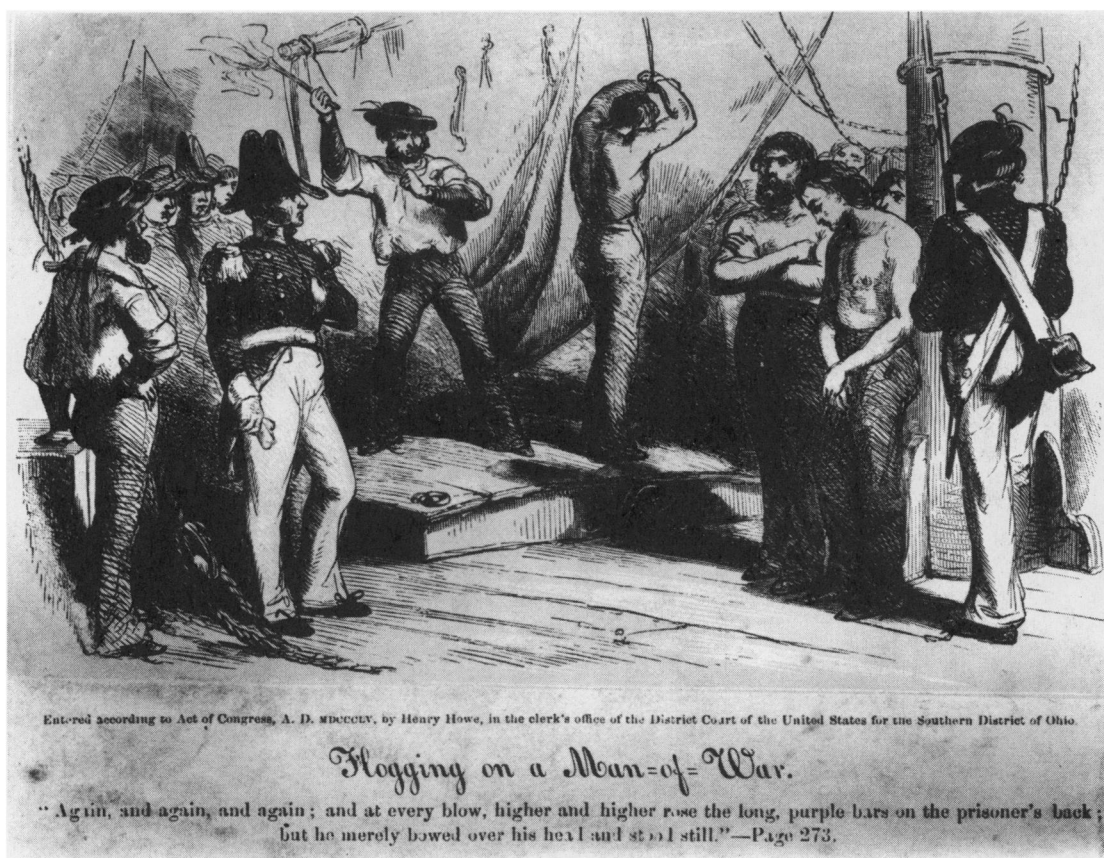


FIGURE 7. The humanitarian spectacle of pain: a naval flogging. Henry Howe, *Life and Death on the Ocean: A Collection of Extraordinary Adventures, in the Form of Personal Narratives . . . with Thrilling Relations of Experiences and of Sufferings* (Cincinnati, 1855), between pp. 272–73. Howe excerpted and abridged this account of a naval flogging from Herman Melville's novel *White Jacket, or the World in a Man-of-War* (1850). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

employed a common device of likening the broad range of violent practices deplored by humanitarians to outdated or non-Anglo-American modes of torture. The public whipping post and even the tying of calves for transport to market were likened to the rack; slave quarters in the American South were identified with "the dungeons of the Popish Inquisition"; capital punishment was compared with Inquisitorial live burnings and drawings asunder, Chinese flayings, boiling to death, or the torture of the wheel.⁴⁷

Richard Henry Dana, Jr., "Cruelty to Seamen," *American Jurist* (October 1839), rpt. edn., *Cruelty to Seamen* (Berkeley, Calif., 1937).

⁴⁷ Benjamin Rush, "An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments upon Criminals, and upon Society," in Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral & Philosophical* (Philadelphia, 1798), 163; R. Fletcher, *A Few Notes on Cruelty to Animals; On the Inadequacy of Penal Law; On General Hospitals for Animals; &c.* (London, 1846), 25; [George Bourne], *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America* (Middletown, Conn., 1834), 151. On analogies for capital punishment, see G. W. Quinby, *The Gallows, the Prison, and the Poor-house: A Plea for Humanity; Showing the Demands of Christianity in Behalf of the Criminal and*

One argument against such punishments focused on their ill effects on the victim, who was said to be debased and hardened by corporal punishment, which destroyed his self-respect and made him more recklessly vicious than ever. "FLOGGING, in many instances, destroys the *self-respect* and *manly dignity* of the child or pupil on whom it is inflicted—without which it is *impossible* to have a *sensible* and *good* child," argued school reformer Lyman Cobb. Another argument addressed the pernicious influence of corporal punishment on the practitioner, hardening and debasing him as well as his victim, transforming him into a tyrant or worse. In a discussion of schoolboy flogging, George B. Emerson reported that "the effect is almost necessarily bad on the individual who inflicts the pain. It excites a horrible feeling in him,—a feeling which we might conceive to belong to evil spirits." In *Two Years before the Mast*, Captain Frank Thompson "danced about the deck" during the brutal flogging of two sailors; to explain why he ordered the punishment, he shouted, "It's because I like to do it—because I like to do it! It suits me!"⁴⁸

But the broadest area of concern among humanitarian reformers lay with the effects of corporal punishments on spectators. Benjamin Rush addressed this problem systematically in "An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments upon Criminals, and upon Society" (1787). "By an immutable law of our nature," he wrote in good sentimental fashion, "distress of all kinds, when *seen*, produces sympathy, and a disposition to relieve it." When the suffering in question cannot be alleviated, however, as in the case of public execution, sympathy proves abortive, its powers are weakened, and spectators are thus trained to contemplate misery without emotion or sympathy.⁴⁹ Rush's argument quickly became a commonplace in the literature of humanitarian reform. According to Thomas Eddy (the Quaker merchant known as the "John Howard of America"), "The hearts of the people were made callous by the sight of stocks, whipping posts, pillories in every shire town or considerable village." One witness after another in *American Slavery as It Is* testified to the evil effects of watching frequent slave floggings: "[M]y own heart was becoming so hardened that I could witness with comparative indifference, the female writhe under the lash, and her shrieks and cries for mercy ceased to pierce my heart with that keenness, or give me that anguish which they first caused." According to Lyman Cobb, "Children should not witness the butchering or slaughtering of animals" because "it *hardens* their fine and originally kind feelings."⁵⁰

Perishing Classes (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1856); Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, 2d series (Boston, 1894), 109; Charles Spear, "Boiling to Death," in *The Prisoners' Friend: A Monthly Magazine, Devoted to Criminal Reform, Philosophy, Science, Literature, and Art*, vol. 5 (October 1852): 67.

⁴⁸ Lyman Cobb, *The Evil Tendencies of Corporal Punishment as a Means of Moral Discipline in Families and Schools, Examined and Discussed* (New York, 1847), 69; on the effects of discipline on the victim, also see Rush, "Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments," 139. Emerson is quoted from Alonzo Potter and George B. Emerson, *The School and the Schoolmaster: A Manual for the Use of Teachers, Employers, Trustees, Inspectors, &c., &c., of Common Schools* (Boston, 1843), 503. Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast* (1840; New York, 1964), 99. Cruelty to animals, according to one reformer, "bears with it a double curse in the misery that it causes to the sufferer, and in the fearful passions which it raises in him by whom it is inflicted"; James Marshall, *A Short Prize Essay on Cruelty to Animals* . . . (London, 1838), 20.

⁴⁹ Rush, "Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments," 141–42.

⁵⁰ Eddy is quoted in Orlando F. Lewis, *The Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs*,

But the repeated sight of suffering did more than simply deaden the spectator's sensibility, according to a number of reformers. **Eventually, it aroused a positive taste for cruelty.** In Rush's scheme, those spectators already hardened by vice or too young or ignorant to connect the punishments with the crimes that had prompted them **would regard public punishments as arbitrary acts of cruelty and would want to "exercise the same arbitrary cruelty over the feelings and lives of their fellow creatures" by committing their own acts of violence and murder.** According to the journal the *Moral Advocate*, a soldier's first engagement "dulled" his initial instinctive horror of war, until he eventually derived "enjoyment from the most horrid scenes of carnage." "Cruelty [in this instance, to animals]," warned one reformer, "like all other vices, is progressive and ingenious; it calls continually for stronger gratifications, and is driven upon refined methods of satisfying its cravings." Even though "human sufferings are never beheld, for the first time, but with aversion, terror, and disgust," frequent public executions, argued Edward Livingston, made capital punishment "a spectacle, which must frequently be repeated to satisfy the ferocious taste it has formed." He condemned in the strongest possible terms "this atrocious passion for witnessing human agonies, and beholding the slaughter of human beings." One contributor to *American Slavery as It Is* offered a horrific picture of this escalating love of cruelty in creole women who ordered the flogging of their slaves: "Their sensibility changed to fury must needs feed itself for a while on the hideous spectacle; they must, as if to revive themselves, **hear the piercing shrieks, and see the flow of fresh blood; there are some of them who, in their frantic rage, pinch and bite their victims.**" As these passages reveal, the "taste" for cruelty in its spectators was viewed as a "progressive vice," a "craving" or "hunger" that, like substance addiction (Weld invoked the metaphor of "intoxication"), only grew more powerful as it was fed.⁵¹

Was the scenario of suffering as represented in humanitarian reform literature "pornographic"? Not by a rigorous application of Peter Wagner's definition, which requires that pornography realistically represent sexual or genital behavior.⁵² But **reform literature did eroticize pain, constructing it as sexual in nature.** The eroticization of suffering in humanitarian reform sometimes **took the form of overtly sexual references: to the "indecent" nudity and sexual abuse** of idiot or insane women, to the sexual coercion and rape of slave women ("The South,"

1776–1845, Donald H. Goff, intro. (1922; Montclair, N.J., 1967), 9; Philemon Bliss, *American Slavery as It Is*, 10; Cobb, *Evil Tendencies of Corporal Punishment*, 84.

⁵¹ Rush, "Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments," 145; the *Moral Advocate: A Monthly Publication on War, Duelling, Capital Punishment, and Prison Discipline* (1821–1824) is quoted in Glenn, *Campaigns against Corporal Punishment*, 49; Thomas Young, *An Essay on Humanity to Animals* (London, 1798), 42; Edward Livingston, *Remarks on the Expediency of Abolishing the Punishment of Death* (Philadelphia, 1831), 10; *American Slavery as It Is*, 59. Weld wrote, "It is one of the most common caprices of human nature, for the heart to become by habit, not only totally insensible to certain forms of cruelty, which at first gave it inexpressible pain, but even to find its chief amusement in such cruelties, till utterly intoxicated by their stimulation"; *American Slavery as It Is*, 125. Also see Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African* (1786; Georgetown, Ky., 1816), 108.

⁵² Ronald G. Walters has observed that antislavery writings "have little merit as pornography" → "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," *American Quarterly*, 25 (May 1973): 181.

proclaimed Wendell Phillips, “is one great brothel, where half a million of women are flogged to prostitution”), to the rape of war victims, and to the genital mutilation and torture of both male and female slaves.⁵³ More commonly, the humanitarian eroticization of pain took indirect form in references to the illicit excitement generated by the infliction of pain: the “emotions of a doubtful character” awakened in the flogger; the similarly doubtful sense of pleasure reported by some flogging victims; and the “ferocious taste,” “atrocious passion,” or “craving” aroused in spectators to the scenario of suffering.⁵⁴ As Myra Glenn has observed, “By associating whipping with uncontrolled emotion and bestiality, reformers tacitly explored the connection between corporal punishment and illicit sexuality.”⁵⁵ Their treatment of scenarios of suffering, if not narrowly pornographic in nature, assumed that the spectacle of pain was a source of illicit excitement, prurience, and obscenity—the power to evoke revulsion and disgust.

THE HUMANITARIAN EMPHASIS on the moral dangers of watching cruelty placed reformers in a difficult position. Typically, they represented human (and animal)

⁵³ See, for example, the following: on the sexual exposure and abuse of the insane, Dorothea L. Dix, “Memorial: To the Legislature of Massachusetts” (1843), in *On Behalf of the Insane Poor: Selected Reports* (New York, 1971), 5, 8; and Dix, “Memorial: To the Honorable the Legislature of the State of New York” (1844), in *On Behalf of the Insane Poor*, 3–4; on the sexual coercion of slave women, *Speech of Wendell Phillips, at the Melodeon, Thursday Evening, Jan. 27, 1853* (n.p., n.d.), 7; and Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 17; on the rape of war victims, *Turkish Barbarity: An Affecting Narrative of the Unparalleled Sufferings of Mrs. Sophia Mazro, a Greek Lady of Missolonghi* (Providence, R.I. [1828]), 19, 22, 26; and William Ladd, “Address Delivered at the Tenth Anniversary of the Massachusetts Peace Society, December 25, 1825” (Boston, 1826), note “F”; on the genital torture and mutilation of slaves, *American Slavery as It Is*, 86; Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, 14; [Thomas Clarkson], *An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons, in the Years 1790 and 1791, on the Part of the Petitioner for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1855), 78. Ronald Walters argues that the abolitionist treatment of slavery as an institution founded on “absolute, irresponsible power on one side, and entire subjection on the other” (Charles K. Whipple, 1858) was frequently cast in sexual terms—not surprisingly, he argues, in view of the attention of contemporary pornography to scenarios of dominance and submission. “For abolitionists the distance was not great from lust for power to mere lust,” and the literature of antislavery was filled with references to the licentiousness of the South, to scenes of rape, sexual coercion, and debauchery; “Erotic South,” 178, 186, 180. On the abolitionist attention to the sexual vulnerability of slave women, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), chaps. 1, 3.

⁵⁴ Educational reformer Cyrus Peirce confessed to “emotions of a doubtful character” aroused by flogging, quoted in Glenn, *Campaigns against Corporal Punishment*, 21; the same source offers several stories of the pleasure of some flogging victims, 47; the last references to “ferocious taste” etc. are cited above, n. 51.

⁵⁵ Glenn, *Campaigns against Corporal Punishment*, 46. I would, however, question Glenn’s assumption (also present in Marcus, *Other Victorians*; see note 36 above) that “an underlying fear of homosexuality probably heightened anxiety about this connection [between corporal punishment and illicit sexuality]” (46). In view of the interchangeability of the sexes in both humanitarian and pornographic scenarios of suffering (men abuse men, women abuse women, men abuse women, and women abuse men), this special scholarly attention to presumed anxieties about homosexuality suggests some particular, essential connection between homosexuality and sadomasochism that is assumed rather than argued or demonstrated. A further unexamined implication of this view may be that the infliction of pain by men on women (a common scenario of suffering in both humanitarian and pornographic literature) is somehow more natural, or at least less unnatural, than the infliction of pain by men on men—presumably because the man-over-woman scenario conforms to the patriarchal distribution of social power.

suffering as a “horrible picture,” “appalling spectacle,” or “horrible scene.”⁵⁶ And they often rested their claim to moral authority on their status as eyewitnesses to the sufferings they addressed. Weld’s subtitle for *American Slavery as It Is* was *Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*—many of whom laid careful emphasis on “the scenes that I have witnessed.” George Bourne offered his *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*, “as I saw it for nearly seven years in Virginia.” Dorothea Dix told one state legislature after another that “*I tell what I have seen*” of the sufferings of the insane.⁵⁷

Was it possible, then, that the reformers’ own sensibilities had been blunted or, worse, that their spectatorship had generated in them a positive taste for cruelty? As though in defense against such a charge, reformers filled their writings with close descriptions of their own immediate emotional response to the spectacle of suffering, to demonstrate that their sensibilities remained undamaged. The sensitivity to pain to which they thus laid claim proved less a matter of sentimental sympathy than of Gothic horror, revulsion, and disgust. “To see a woman, who, after having had her husband and children butchered before her eyes, herself violated, her nose and lips cut off, and then sent forth to wander friendless, houseless, and half naked, is indeed dreadful!” reported Samuel Gridley Howe from insurrectionary Greece. Lyman Cobb wrote, “I have often seen both parents and teachers flog their children or pupils until my whole soul was shocked and disgusted”; Richard Henry Dana, Jr., testified that he felt “sick and almost faint” at the sight of his fellow seamen being whipped.⁵⁸ Other humanitarians reported that they “never could look on but a moment” at the spectacle of suffering or that they shut their eyes “as the last dreadful act was going on.”⁵⁹ Their spectatorship, they thus suggested, had been too short-lived to blunt their feelings, and its voluntary termination demonstrated their freedom from any “ferocious taste.” One reformer went so far as to claim that he had never actually witnessed the evil he condemned: “What can be a more horrid spectacle than a fellow being hung between heaven and earth, struggling in the last agonies of life, with the giant grasp of death? It must be horrible. I have never witnessed an execution. I never will, if I can avoid it.” Others simply prayed that they might never have to witness such a terrible scene (a public execution, a chained madwoman) again.⁶⁰ And

⁵⁶ Thomas Clarkson, *The Cries of Africa, to the Inhabitants of Europe, or, a Survey of That Bloody Commerce Called the Slave-Trade* (London, 1822), 49; *Turkish Barbarity*, 35; Lydia Maria Child, *Anti-Slavery Catechism* (Newburyport, 1836), 9.

⁵⁷ Nehemiah Caulkins, *American Slavery as It Is*, 11; [Bourne], *Picture of Slavery*, 80; Dix, Massachusetts Memorial, 3.

⁵⁸ *Turkish Barbarity*, 25–26; Cobb, *Evil Tendencies of Corporal Punishment*, 21; Dana, *Two Years before the Mast*, 97.

⁵⁹ Moulton, *American Slavery as It Is*, 20; [William Makepeace Thackeray], “Going to See a Man Hanged,” *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country*, 20 (August 1840), quoted in David D. Cooper, *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England* (Athens, Ohio, 1974), 9.

⁶⁰ A. C. Thomas, *A Lecture on Capital Punishment: Delivered in the First Universalist Church, Philadelphia, on the Evening of June 20, 1830* (Philadelphia, 1830), 19. After attending a double execution at the Tombs in New York City, a police officer reported, “It was the most sickening sight that I ever beheld and God grant that I may never have an occasion to witness another execution”; quoted in “Crime, Poverty and the Streets of New York City: The Diary of William H. Bell, 1850–51,” Sean Wilentz, ed., *History Workshop*, 7 (Spring 1979): 148. Dorothea Dix similarly exclaimed, “grant I may never look upon another such scene!” as that of the insane young woman she found chained to the wall of the poorhouse at Westford, Massachusetts; see Dix, Massachusetts Memorial, 16.

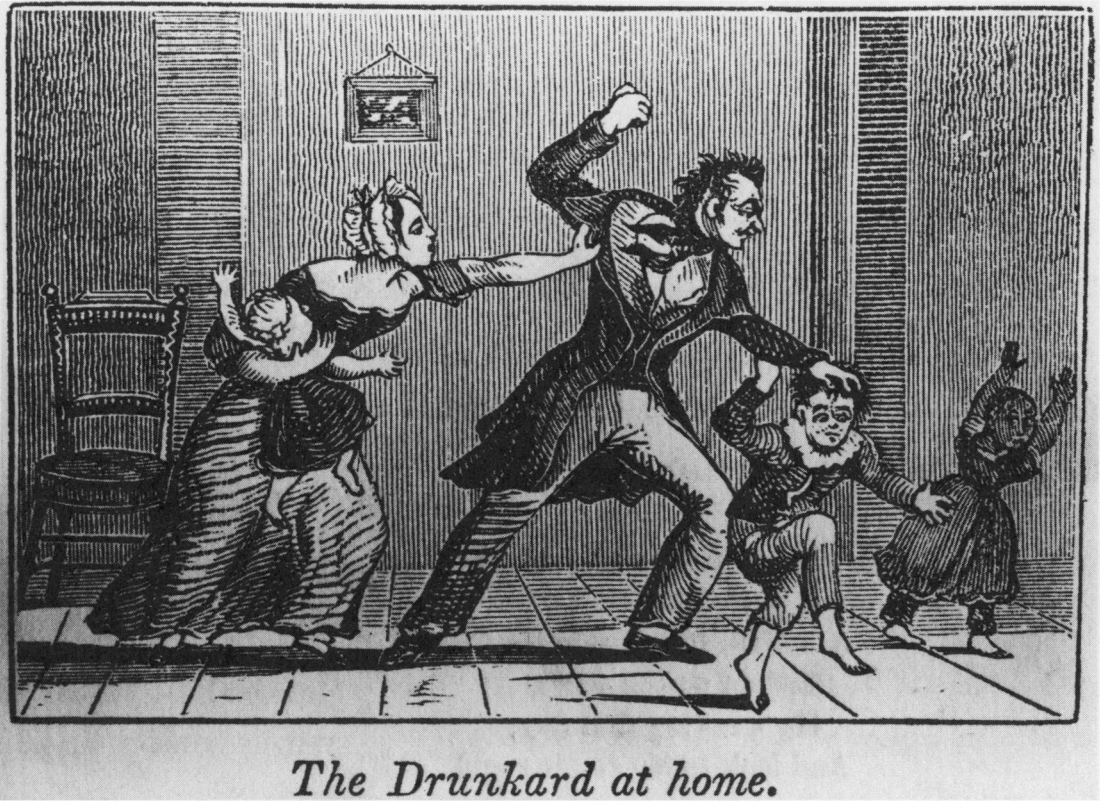


FIGURE 8. The humanitarian reader as imaginative witness to the spectacle of suffering: the text of this juvenile temperance volume commanded young readers, "Look at that hard-hearted man [the violent drunkard]. He is holding his little boy by the hair with one hand, while the other is raised to give him a blow." Dr. Charles Jewett, *The Youth's Temperance Lecturer* (Boston, 1841), 20. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

some reported that even the memory of what they had seen—in this case, the suffering of African slaves—"now chills my blood with horror."⁶¹

In attempting to exculpate themselves of any guilt attaching to their own spectatorship at the scenario of suffering, humanitarian reformers were, however, addressing only part of the moral dilemma that confronted them. Their presentations of suffering as a "horrible scene" deliberately recreated for readers' consumption their own immediate experiences of witnessing terrible cruelty. (See Figure 8.) Indeed, humanitarian reformers frequently commanded readers to act as imaginative witnesses to the spectacle of suffering: "Behold one [slave] covered with stripes, into which melted wax is poured—another tied down to a block or a stake—a third suspended in the air by his thumbs."⁶² Did such graphic represen-

⁶¹ "Captain Riley's Narrative," quoted in Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston, 1833), 74.

⁶² [Benjamin Rush], *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, upon Slave-Keeping* (Philadelphia, 1773), 26. For other examples of the visual imperative, see Clarkson, *Cries of Africa*, 39; Dorothea L. Dix, "Memorial Soliciting Enlarged and Improved Accommodations for the Insane of the State of Tennessee, by the Establishment of a New Hospital" (1847), in *On Behalf of the Insane Poor*, 29; Heman Humphrey, *Parallel between Intemperance and the Slave-Trade* (New York, 1828), 5, 8; Wright,

tations of the spectacle of suffering subject readers to the moral risks of blunted sensibilities and sadistic tastes? Could the “atrocious passion for witnessing human agonies” be aroused through the printed word? Humanitarian defensiveness on this point was abundantly evident in reformers’ repeated and formulaic denials of any intention to “harrow up” the distressing emotions of readers. “I have given many details of the miseries and horrors of war,” explained American nonresistant Henry Wright, “not to gratify a morbid appetite, or to harrow up the feelings of the reader, but solely to illustrate principles and practices that are inseparable from all war.” Similarly, Charles Spear wrote, “We have not presented these scenes to harrow up the mind of the reader, but rather to show the influence of public executions upon the criminal, and the multitudes who attend such scenes.”⁶³

Humanitarians offered a variety of narrative strategies designed to distance themselves from any imputations of sensationalistic pandering. Prominent among these was the strategic omission, which typically asserted that “the scene [in this case, the torture of cats] was too horrible for description.” “For my reader’s sake,” explained one opponent of the slave trade, “I suppress the recital of particulars [concerning the punishment of slave insurrectionaries].”⁶⁴ Another reformer used asterisks to denote certain “circumstances too horrible to be given to the world” concerning a murderous Jamaican planter.⁶⁵ A common variant of this convention pointed to the unspeakableness of the horror of extreme pain and suffering: “What pencil can paint, what language can describe, the horrors of Borodino, Moscow, Berezina and Waterloo?” asked peace reformer William Ladd.⁶⁶

Such strategic (and self-conscious) omissions of scenes “too horrid and indecent to mention”⁶⁷ in humanitarian reform literature bore a close relationship to the practice later known as bowdlerizing, the selective expurgation of texts

Defensive War, iii; John Woolman, “Considerations on Keeping Negroes: Part Second,” in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Phillips P. Moulton, ed. (New York, 1971), 232.

⁶³ Wright, *Defensive War*, iii; Charles Spear, *Essays on the Punishment of Death* (Boston, 1844), 49. For other examples of this formula, see Dix, Tennessee Memorial, 28; Weld, *American Slavery as It Is*, 86; Samuel Gridley Howe, *An Essay on Separate and Congregate Systems of Prison Discipline: Being a Report Made to the Boston Prison Discipline Society* (Boston, 1846), 56–57; William Ladd, *An Address, Delivered at Portland, February 6, 1824, before the Peace Society of Maine* (Portland, 1824), 4. An opponent of cruelty to animals apologetically assured his readers “that the atrocities detailed in this little volume, are neither gratuitously multiplied in number, nor exaggerated in degree”; Egerton Smith, *The Elysium of Animals: A Dream* (London, 1836), vii.

⁶⁴ Fletcher, *Few Notes*, 18; Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 17. For other examples of this convention, see Dix, Tennessee Memorial, 23; and “Memorial of D. L. Dix, Praying a Grant of Land for the Relief and Support of the Indigent Curable and Incurable Insane in the United States” (1848), in *On Behalf of the Insane Poor*, 8; Charles Spear, *Prisoners’ Friend* (March 1853): 322; [Clarkson], *Abstract of the Evidence*, 112.

⁶⁵ [Clarkson], *Abstract of the Evidence*, 78. This passage concerned the testimony of two witnesses before the House of Commons: “The rest of the conduct of this planter, as described by Captain Ross, was, after a debate, cancelled by the Committee of the House of Commons who took the evidence, as containing circumstances too horrible to be given to the world; and, therefore, the reader will find their places supplied by asterisks, in the evidence at large”; 78.

⁶⁶ Ladd, Massachusetts Address, 9–10. Also see Humphrey, *Parallel between Intemperance and the Slave-Trade*, 5.

⁶⁷ [Clarkson], *Abstract of the Evidence*, 82. Clarkson was referring to testimony concerning the conduct of a clergyman’s wife at Port Royal, who had tied up a woman slave and “abused” her with cayenne pepper “in a way too horrid and indecent to mention.”

in the interest of decency, emerging during the same period. Scattered incidents of this practice (which was called “castrating” or “gelding” until those terms themselves were politely avoided) occurred in the eighteenth century. Then, in 1807, Dr. Thomas Bowdler—a former prison reformer, who had grown disgusted with the failure of his cause—published his expurgated *Family Shakespeare*. (Noah Webster would follow suit in 1833 with an expurgated Bible.) The heightened concern for refinement at work in the practice of bowdlerization was a by-product of various developments including the growth of evangelical religion (especially Methodism, in England), the emerging concern for safeguarding the special virtue of womanhood in an industrializing society, and an elitist concern for the dangers of exposing improper material to the new mass readership. But it was the cult of sensibility that contributed most to the heightened concern for delicacy: delicate minds had to be protected from too much evil, according to sentimentalists, lest excessive exposure to evil harden them, rendering them incapable of being shocked, insensitive to evil, and indelicate.⁶⁸

In humanitarian reform literature, the self-conscious omission of certain material served primarily to highlight its prurient nature, by calling attention to the inescapable conviction that dreadful pain was obscene pain. Significantly, the strategy of omission was sometimes used in gambit-fashion to introduce the very kind of material it purported to set aside. Thomas Clarkson once used an asterisk to point readers in the direction of the disgusting details he was claiming to suppress.⁶⁹ Other reformers similarly relegated to footnotes or appendices their most horrific descriptions of spectacles of suffering: as one explained, “At the suggestion of some judicious friends, the appalling description of the *Knacker’s Yard*, illustrated by the masterly sketch of *Cruikshank*, has been transferred to the Appendix at the end of the volume.”⁷⁰ Most commonly, reformers’ apologies, demurrals, and denials of sensationalism were simply followed by shockingly vivid

⁶⁸ See Noel Perrin, *Dr. Bowdler’s Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America* (New York, 1969).

⁶⁹ He first assured his readers, “Horrible as this account may appear, we assert, in the most solemn manner, that we have omitted to mention many circumstances*, which would render it still more afflicting.” Then, he used the footnote denoted by the asterisk to point the reader in the appropriate direction: “*See the evidence before the English parliament, in the cases where the slaves have been afflicted with contagious disorders, particularly the flux, when, says one of the witnesses, ‘the floor of their prison was covered with blood and mucus, like a slaughter-house.’” Clarkson, *Cries of Africa*, 27. Significantly, asterisks were used in eighteenth-century sexual censorship to indicate expurgated material; see Peter Sabor, “The Censor Censured: Expurgating *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*,” in *’Tis Nature’s Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment*, Robert Purks Maccubbin, ed. (Cambridge, 1987), 192–201. Sabor argues that such a practice “pruriently draws attention to deleted material” and that the asterisks “invite readers to greater flights of sexual fantasy,” in some cases, than the deleted words themselves might have done; 197.

⁷⁰ Smith, *Elysium of Animals*, vii. William Ladd in his Massachusetts Address offered few gory details of war in the main body of his text but appended four pages of notes labeled “A” through “F” that told tales of wounded soldiers burning alive in field hospitals, starving soldiers resorting to cannibalism, and acts of rape and arson. Edward Livingston offered a graphic description of the Russian punishment by knout in a lengthy footnote to *Remarks on the Expediency of Abolishing the Punishment of Death*, 25–26; Lyman Cobb allocated to a footnote his close description of the fatal flogging of a British soldier at Hounslow barracks, in *Evil Tendencies of Corporal Punishment*, 61–62. One animal reformer used a footnote to detail the abuse of horses in animal pounds; see Rev. John Toogood, *The Book of Nature: A Discourse on Some of Those Instances of the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, Which Are within the Reach of Common Observation; To Which Is Added, The Duty of Mercy, and Sin of Cruelty to Brutes, Taken Chiefly from Dr. Primatt’s Dissertation* (Boston, 1802), 42.

representations of human suffering. Having proclaimed his desire not “to harrow your feelings with stories of cruelty,” Dr. David Nelson in *American Slavery as It Is* went on to tell the story of a slave girl whose hand was thrust into boiling water in punishment for a minor offense. Having reported that “the first shock [of seeing an abused madman caged near the public road] was too painful to be described,” Samuel Gridley Howe proceeded to offer a vivid description of the man’s sufferings.⁷¹

HUMANITARIAN REFORMERS WERE CAUGHT in a contradiction largely of their own making. To arouse popular opposition to the evil practices they sought to eradicate, they deemed it necessary to display those practices in all their horror: “civilized” virtue required a shocked spectatorial sympathy in response to pain scenarios both real and willfully imagined. But, by their own line of argument, viewing the spectacle of suffering could inflict terrible moral damage on the spectator, turning him or her into a “savage” with an “atrocious passion” for cruelty. Their awareness of this moral dilemma is clear, but time and again, they stressed to readers that “we must not allow our nerves to be more tender than our consciences.” “Do you turn with inexpressible disgust from these details? It is worse to witness the reality. Is your refinement shocked by such statements? There is but one remedy—prevent the possibility of such monstrous abuses by providing hospitals and asylums.”⁷² Humanitarian reform was a major cultural vehicle for the growing unacceptability of pain; it was also, inescapably, an expression and even a demonstration of the new obscenity of pain. Apologize though they might, the reformers were caught up in the same cultural linkages of revulsion with desire that fueled a wide range of popular literary explorations of pain.

To understand reform literature as deliberate obscenity aimed at titillating its readers, however, is to miss the point. The reformers’ purpose was not to exploit the obscenity of pain but to expose it, in order to redefine a wide range of previously accepted social practices as cruel and unacceptable. One purpose of the reformers’ close descriptions of their own horror, revulsion, and disgust in the face of suffering was to instruct readers in the appropriate response to pain. When Lydia Maria Child reported that “executions always excite a universal shudder among the innocent, the humane, and the wise-hearted” and when peace reformer William Ladd indicated that slavery “is viewed with horror and disgust, by every virtuous member of society,” they were firmly pointing their readers toward the appropriate emotional response to the spectacle of suffering.⁷³

In crafting their graphic representations of the spectacle of suffering, humanitarian reformers were not tapping into a timeless human appetite for sadomasochistic expression so much as participating in the production of a new cultural linkage of violence and sex, a linkage whose primary purpose was to establish the obscenity of pain. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Richard von

⁷¹ *American Slavery as It Is*, 86; S. G. Howe, *Insanity in Massachusetts* (Boston, 1843), 8.

⁷² Child, *Appeal in Favor of That Class*, 7; Dix, New York Memorial, 9.

⁷³ Lydia Maria Child, *Letters from New York*, 3d edn. (New York, 1845), 224; Ladd, Massachusetts Address, 6.

Krafft-Ebing formally introduced the terms “sadism” and “masochism” into the psychopathological lexicon, labeling them “the fundamental forms of psychosexual perversion, which may make their appearance at any point in the domain of sexual aberration.” In dozens of case studies, he documented his subjects’ fantasies and ritual enactments of pain scenarios that replicated those of humanitarian reform: scenes of judicial torture (by bastinado and knout), schoolboy floggings, the slaughter and abuse of domestic animals, the physical abuse of mental patients (“brutal, uneducated female warders beating me mercilessly”), and the flagellation of slaves. One of Krafft-Ebing’s subjects confessed that his first experience of sexual excitement at puberty was prompted by reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; a generation later, Sigmund Freud reported that Stowe’s novel was cited by many of his patients (whom he labeled hysterics and obsessional neurotics) as the original stimulus for their common fantasy that “a child is being beaten.”⁷⁴ The cultural power of this fully psychopathologized understanding of the sex-pain connection was registered by those English humanitarians who, in this same period, cited Continental sexology in identifying as “flagellomania” any effort to restore the judicial practice of corporal punishment.⁷⁵

By the turn of the century, psychopathologists and humanitarians agreed: the linking of sex with pain, whether in the fantasies of sadists and masochists or in the formal legal effort to resurrect judicial flogging, was a by-product of diseased and perverted minds. But the historical emergence of the pornography of pain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and its wide-ranging presence in a variety of popular literary genres point to the historical inadequacy of attributing the phenomenon solely to sexual psychopathology, whether individual or collective. As Michel Foucault observed, “Sadism is not a name finally given to a practice as old as Eros; it is a massive cultural fact which appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, Franklin S. Klaf, trans., from 12th German edn. (New York, 1965), 143. For case studies documenting these various scenarios, see for example: judicial torture, Case 80; schoolboy floggings, Cases 42, 57, 60, 143; animal slaughter and abuse, Cases 45, 47, 57, 62, 134; abuse of a mental asylum inmate, Case 84; slave whippings, Cases 57 (the reader of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), 70, 80, 84. Sigmund Freud, “‘A Child Is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions,” *Collected Papers*, Vol. 2, *Clinical Papers and Papers on Technique*, Ernest Jones, ed., Joan Riviere, trans. (London, 1949), 173 (I am grateful to Michael Meranze for calling this reference to my attention). In a related development, an openly pornographic tale of antebellum Southern life (focused on floggings, rapes, and general social violence on the plantation), entitled *The Memoirs of Dolly Morton*, was printed in Paris in 1899; see Wagner, *Eros Revived*, 302. Freud offers the historically useful suggestion that reading about flagellation had replaced the social witnessing of punishment as the formative “stimulus” of this fantasy, since “children were no longer beaten in the higher forms at school”; “Child Is Being Beaten,” 173.

⁷⁵ In a footnote to his essay “Facts about Flogging,” Joseph Collinson wrote, “Psychopathically regarded, this cry is simply a manifestation (unconscious, perhaps, but not the less real on that account) of what has been termed ‘flagellomania.’ Those who have studied pathology, as expounded by Continental thinkers, know that the use of the rod, as at present inflicted, is evidence that flagellomania is a real and widespread disease.” Collinson, *Humanitarian Essays*, Henry S. Salt, ed. (London, 1910), 6–7. Another essay in this volume quoted Havelock Ellis to support the author-editor’s position that the humanitarian “hatred of flogging in every shape and form may be partly due to a recoil from such sensual craving for the infliction of pain on others”; see Henry S. Salt, “The Ethics of Corporal Punishment,” 6 (each essay is paginated independently).

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York, 1965), 210.

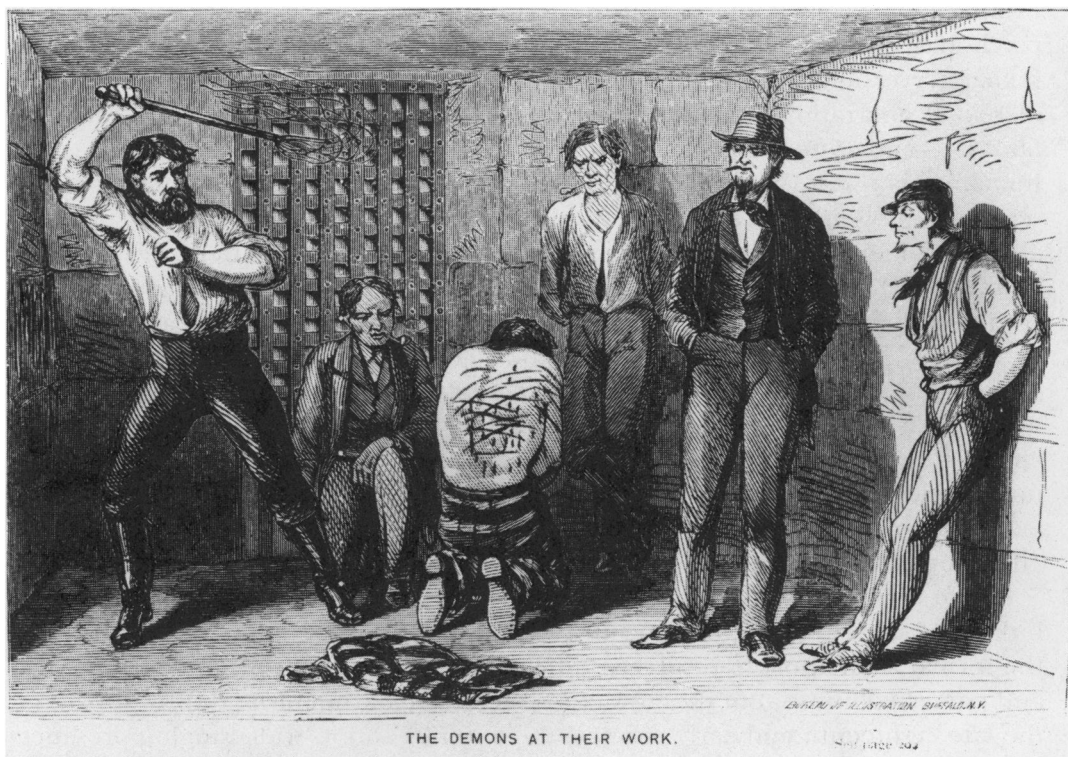


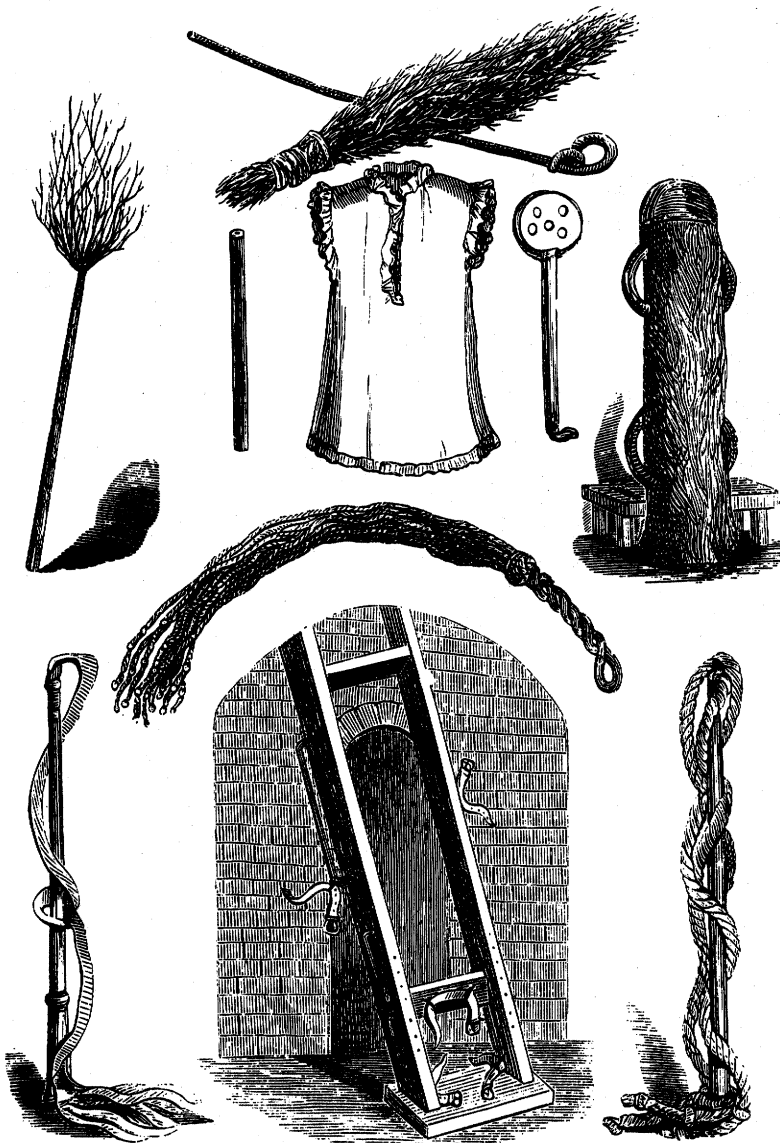
FIGURE 9. The obscenity of privatized pain: "Here! step up to this window that looks into the 'black room,' or room where the whipping is done. There, surrounded by half a dozen fiends in human shape; naked and upon his knees, is the poor [prisoner]. A powerful brute stands over him, grinning like a fiend incarnate. In his brawny hand he holds that merciless instrument of torture, the cat-o'-nine tails; rising upon his toes, he brings the hard-twisted, bullet-tipped thongs *down* upon the poor victim's bare back, each blow counting nine lashes, eating into the tender flesh, and drawing forth the shrieks of pain we heard." [J. A. Banka], *An Illustrated History and Description of State Prison Life, By One Who Has Been There* (Toledo, 1871), 96. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the case studies cited by Krafft-Ebing and Freud should be understood as episodes in a long-term historical transformation in the cultural significance of pain. The eighteenth-century cult of sensibility had proclaimed pain unacceptable but simultaneously discovered it to be alluring, "delicious." Gothic fiction, the canonical literature of the Romantic agony, and popular sensationalism had reinforced the close connection between revulsion and desire in the face of pain. Late eighteenth and especially nineteenth-century pornography transformed the sentimental scenario of suffering into an overtly voyeuristic attention to a fully sexualized cruelty. Similar, though muted, themes were at work in the literature of humanitarian reform, with its many graphic representations of terrible cruelty and suffering, embedded in a tangle of apologies, explanations, indirections, and bowdleristic omissions—all of which revealed the reformers' unhappy realization of their own inescapable participation in the pornography of pain. In rapid and overlapping stages, pain had become questionable, intolerable, disgusting, and obscene.

The pornography of pain played a significant role in directing some humani-

Plate XX.

WHIPPING IMPLEMENTS.



The figures in the upper half of this plate represent the Prison-Rod and Whipping-Post. The Rattan, Birch, and Loose Garment belong to ladies' boarding schools in the last century. The Rule and Spatula (or "Jonathan") were used in boys' schools. The holes in the spatula raised blisters.

Beneath are the modern Jesuit discipline with the Whipping-Post or Hurdle in Wandsworth House of Correction. On either side are Knouts of leather and of twisted cord.

FIGURE 10: A still life of "Whipping Implements" (judicial and schoolroom), from William M. Cooper [James Bertram Glass], *Flagellation and the Flagellants*, plate 20, opposite p. 478. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

tarian activity toward the privatization, as opposed to the eradication, of pain practices. As John Stuart Mill observed in 1836, "One of the effects of civilization (not to say one of the ingredients in it), is, that the spectacle, and even the very idea, of pain, is kept more and more *out of sight* of those classes who enjoy in their

fulness the benefits of civilization.”⁷⁷ In both England and the United States, the movement to abolish capital punishment was effectively rechanneled by the mid-nineteenth century into the privatization of execution. Penitentiaries replaced the public torments of the scaffold with their own methods of corporal punishment and restraint (some traditional, some cruelly innovative), and the directors of the Massachusetts State Prison, for example, defended the expense of their institution on the grounds that “scenes of barbarity . . . have been removed from the public eye.” Nineteenth-century mental hospitals quickly reverted to the practice of heroic medical procedures as well as corporal constraints (often applied as punishments).⁷⁸ But, in the social setting of the new institutions for deviance, such practices remained largely, in Mill’s phrase, out of sight of the respectable and civilized classes. As Randall McGowen has observed, the real concern expressed by the movement to privatize execution “was as much to separate oneself from the violence associated with punishment as it was to curtail the amount of violence employed in punishment.”⁷⁹

This new social distance between the humanitarian and the sight of punishment served, finally, to enhance the pornography of pain, as evidenced most notably in the sensationalist and lurid literature of the asylum exposé—works by alleged former inmates of prisons and mental hospitals, who served up horrific tales of the terrible tortures practiced behind asylum walls (see Figure 9).⁸⁰ Hidden pain was forbidden pain, and forbidden pain was increasingly represented in print as obscene. The pornography of pain emerging in Anglo-American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries points to the imaginative consequences of the “civilizing process,” which was putting into question a range of traditional cultural practices centered on the willful infliction of pain. Historically, just as the spectacle of punishment was coming under humanitarian attack, an imaginative literature appeared that established a new cultural linkage between pain and sexual obscenity or taboo. The traditional social policy of pain was yielding to a modern pornography of pain; the social theater of public punishment gave way to a solitary fantasy theater, which staged private, interior scenarios of cruelty; legitimate spectatorship was replaced by furtive voyeurism, culminating in the private fantasies and obsessions of Krafft-Ebing’s and Freud’s guilt-racked cases (see Figure 10). The humanitarian sensibility fostered an imaginative cultural underground of the illicit and forbidden, accessible through the expanding cultural practice of solitary reading, at the center of which was a flogging scene.

⁷⁷ John Stuart Mill, “Civilization,” in *Essays on Politics and Culture*, Gertrude Himmelfarb, ed. (New York, 1962), 57. Mill is quoted → Randall McGowen, “A Powerful Sympathy: Terror, the Prison, and Humanitarian Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (July 1986): 332, emphasis added.

⁷⁸ On the nineteenth-century privatization of punishments, see McGowen, “Civilizing Punishment”; Masur, *Rites of Execution*, chap. 5 (the Massachusetts prison directors are quoted on 88–89); Michael Meranze, “A Criminal Is Being Beaten: The Politics of Punishment and the History of the Body,” unpublished paper; Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness*. For a discussion of the historical relationship between privatization and the “civilizing process,” see Spierenburg, *Broken Spell*, chap. 1.

⁷⁹ McGowen, “Civilizing Punishment,” 280.

⁸⁰ Karen Halttunen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum, 1780–1860,” paper delivered at the American Studies Association meeting, New Orleans, November 1990.