



“NOTHING PREPARES YOU”: LIMITS OF EXPERIENCE

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“Nothing Prepares You”, a poem written by Sri Lankan poet Vivimarie VanderPoorten hits us on our face with some familiar reality from which we cannot run away despite our desperateness to do so. “Nothing Prepares You” is not only the title of the poem; it is also the title that she has given to *name* her collection of poems AS IF those words are the most suitable ones that she could find *to define, name, or call* all that she has written while writing those lines, words, silences, gaps, and punctuations that appear throughout the collection. Thus, it is a title and a poem at the same time. However, the present paper intends to focus on the second — the poem of which the title is “Nothing Prepares You.”

“Nothing Prepares You for Pain”, the poet says with conviction. The force of the line challenges all lessons, sermons, preaching, and motivational speeches that we have learned about *not getting hurt, guarding ourselves against pain, and letting go* of what is not meant for us. In that sense, it is a challenge to the given discourse of knowledge based on science, for it affirms the impossibility of preparing one for pain: “Nothing Prepares You for Pain”. It talks about three things: being, pain, and preparing — two nouns and one verb together presenting a lesson that cannot be questioned. Had the poem been about either being or pain, it would have had a different effect, for there could be innumerable things to say about those two. The poem becomes decisive because of the verb “prepares”. Thus, it is neither about being nor is it about pain; it is, instead, about *preparing* one for the other.

Pain is inevitable, and everyone is aware of this as a certainty. However, this awareness does not help much when we are hit with it, in Vivimarie’s words, “like a bus in the street.” The moment of pain, no matter how brief it is when calculated in terms of clock time, gobbles down all other moments before this moment in a manner that it suddenly becomes the only moment that one has had throughout his/her life. This singular moment laden with pain is decisive as no one is able to predict *how* it will act, *what* effect it will create, *how long* it will last, *whether* it will ever end, and *how* it will end. Thus no one is aware of how the moment of pain will unfold. This unpredictability of the unfolding of the moment of pain makes us strangers to the pain despite our familiarity with it.

If this moment remains strange to us, the question we are faced with is how to prepare ourselves for pain.

As mentioned above, everyone is able to understand the word “pain” for everyone has experienced it in many different ways. Our scorn or disapproval towards pain is determined by our awareness of the individual as well as collective experiences of pain. However, the problem is whether such awareness could *prepare* us for pain. Here, it is important to understand the meaning of the verb “prepare”.

Etymologically, the verb has a Latin origin. It comes from the Latin word “*praeparare*”, which means “to make ready beforehand”. In Latin, “*prae*” means “before in time”; “*parare*” means “to make ready”. The word-forming element “pre-”, which is from both Old French “pre-” and medieval Latin “pre-” is derived from Latin “*prae*”. In that sense, the English word, ‘*prepare*’ means to “make someone or something ready beforehand.” The OED offers us the following meanings.

1. To make something or someone ready to be used or to do something.
2. To make yourself ready to do something or for something that you expect to happen

3. To make food ready to be eaten
4. To make medicine or chemical substance

If to make one prepared or ready for the pain, it could be done only by going through the former experience of pain, for pain could come and remain only as an experience felt and lived. The familiarity of pain as a lived experience could give us a sense of it in terms of its nature and effect. Yet, being experienced in/with pain is never a qualification that counts in preparing one for pain, because pain is not a repetition of an experience. It is always fresh and different and thus strange even if the degree of strangeness is incalculable. Nevertheless, one should not rush to conclude that experience of pain is insignificant to any sincere attempt of preparing oneself for pain. Rather, it is important to understand the limits of experience and experience-based knowledge.

Hence, employing a poststructuralist approach to language and culture as the methodology, the present study based on the poem “Nothing Prepares You” by Vivimarie Vanderpoorten intends to explore the significance of literature to understand the idea of knowledge in which the Platonic tradition which barred literature becoming knowledge is questioned. It seeks to discuss the limits of experience-based knowledge with a focus on the idea of singularity and of repetition.

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