



ESCARGOTESQUE
or, What is Experience?

M.H. Bowker



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dead letter office

BABEL Working Group

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The **BABEL Working Group** is a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholar-gypsies with no leaders or followers, no top and no bottom, and only a middle. BABEL roams and stalks the ruins of the post-historical university as a multiplicity, a pack, looking for other roaming packs with which to cohabit and build temporary shelters for intellectual vagabonds. We also take in strays.

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Illustration of snail also by M.H. Bowker.



for Zoe

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PART 1: FORECASTS

Pocked by fist-sized rust holes, ancient trucks disgorge their guts across the garage's dirt floors.

A thoughtful 'night guard,' you wonder who would steal a mutilated *fourgon* that hasn't run in ten years, even from a garage with no walls.

Beyond the imaginary boundaries of the *soi-disant* garage on the edge of Porto-Novo, pertinacious palms erupt from red soot —

bloody despot — in your ears, under your tongue: When you caravan to Burkina Faso in the Renault with no floorboards, your eyes go red, you cough red for days.

Above the pushy palms, the moon, which is the same moon over Paris, seems absolutely different, absolutely deadly, absolutely merciless.

Suspecting you have marred the moon with occidental ejactamenta — fantasies of Africa fierce and wild — you fear you are some kind of racist.

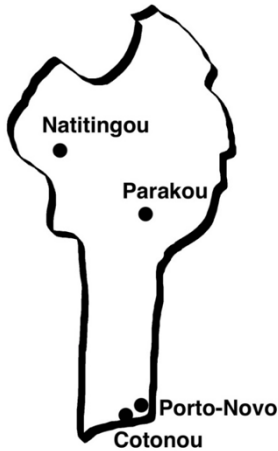
And yet the clouds look different, too: like great daggers.



§

Mouru Shabi Abraham, unemployed tailor and joint-occupant of the dilapidated *plein-air* schoolroom where you sleep, awaits your return from garbage-collecting to share a supper of corn meal and oil.

He draws on the blackboard a map of Benin like a dagger-cloud.



You draw a map of (1996) Europe.

“*Tu cherches quoi là-dedans?*” [What do you seek in this?]

Abraham scours your face as you swap the chalk, dotting Berlin, Cotonou, Rome, Natitingou, Madrid, Porto-Novo, Paris, Parakou.

Enfin, no one feels understood.

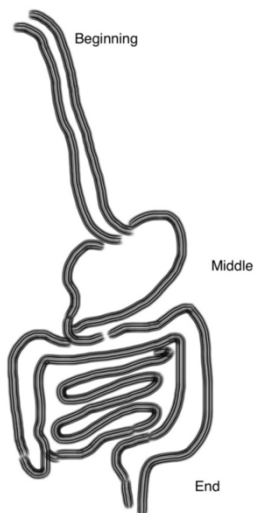
§

You eat the bits of pork left in plantain leaves atop an old lead-acid battery, but they go down hard because of the child's song at the beach:

“Agluzà deux cents,” meaning: *“I ate 200 francs worth of pork.”*

It continues: *“300 of pork. 400 of pork ...”*

“ ... Diarrhea! Diarrhea! Diarrhea! Now I'm dying!”



Like narrative, the digestive tract has a beginning, middle, and end.

§

Oh, you *are* sick.

At first you rose to visit the makeshift latrine behind the broken wall, crawling with fat flies and tiny lizards.

Now you do not eat, drink, or move for sixteen-, eighteen-hour stretches, until Pako shakes you to check your breathing.

Five days in, the boss drops by to ask how your malaria is going: “*Comment ça va ton paludisme?*”

“*Nous avons prié pour toi.*” [We prayed for you.]

“*Dieu te bénisse.*” [God bless.]

The suggestion of malaria burns you up. (Or is it fever?) Either way, he is right about the prayer:

You wake to Abraham supplicating an Evangelical Jesus: “*Mathieu, Mathieu ... Jeyhsoo, Jeyhsoo.*”

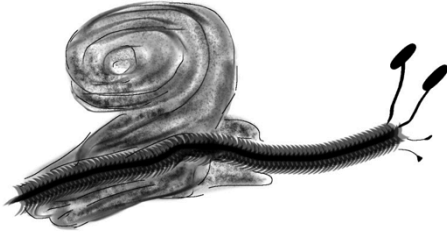
You take solace in dying strangely, absurdly, consequent to desires only you could have conceived.

When you glimpse recovery, you expect that having been near death, or having mistakenly believed you were near death, will enlighten you about the meaning or meaninglessness of life, will inscribe upon your body a beneficent *blessure* that will free you from quotidian ennui: an illusion.



There is pain and there is pain. Not everyone's can be spectacular.

Instead, something within you has collapsed, silently, like a snail detached from its shell.



§

Søren Kierkegaard, in an 1841 sermon, asks:

Was there not a time also in your consciousness, my listener, when cheerfully and without a care you were glad with the glad, when you wept with those who wept, when the thought of God blended irrelevantly with your other conceptions, blended with your happiness but did not sanctify it, blended with your grief but did not comfort it? And later was there not a time when this in some sense guiltless life, which never called itself to account, vanished? ... Was there not a time when you

found no one to whom you could turn, when the darkness of quiet despair brooded over your soul, and you did not have the courage to let it go but would rather hang on to it and you even brooded once more over your despair? ... Was there not a time when you felt that the world did not understand your grief, could not heal it, could not give you any peace, that this had to be in heaven, if heaven was anywhere to be found; alas it seemed to you that the distance between heaven and earth was infinite, and just as you yourself lost yourself in contemplating the immeasurable world, just so God had forgotten you and did not care about you? And in spite of all this, was there not a defiance in you that forbade you to humble yourself under God's mighty hand? Was this not so? And what would you call this condition if you did not call it death, and how would you describe it except as darkness? (1980b, x-xi)

Pace Kierkegaard, we call this condition something other than death and darkness. We name it "experience," which is not to say that experience must be agonizing, but that experience

is caught up with abandonment, “despair,” “defiance,” and “hang[ing] on,” although these entanglements are not always recognized.

The naivety that characterizes Kierkegaard’s pre-lapsarian “guiltless life, which never called itself to account” is the hallmark of *inexperience*: “Innocence is ignorance,” Kierkegaard argues elsewhere (1980, 37). Experience, says the existentialist, disrupts both innocence and ignorance, marking the “immeasurable,” journey from [innocent, ignorant] heaven to [sinful, knowing] earth, a journey whose distance may feel “infinite.”

Of course, for Kierkegaard, “the profound secret of innocence” is “that it is at the same time anxiety [*angst*]. Dreamily the spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself. ... Anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility” (1980, 41–42). Innocence and inexperience entail the terror, the *angst* of possible experience. According to Kierkegaard, the “immeasurable” possibilities of experience coagulate into an “intimated nothing” that can only cause anxiety, since from this nothing there is no

escape or resolution: You cannot retreat from this possibility, nor the freedom and responsibility it implies (what Kierkegaard calls “being able”), once you conceive of it. Sartre’s phrase is: “*L’homme est condamné a être libre*” [We are condemned to be free] (1957, 23).

What Kierkegaard was less apt to recognize is that anxiety, if it is an intuition of possible experience, is at the same time a self-debilitating response, protecting the self from the implications of its freedom. More than a symptom, anxiety can be a mechanism of defense against the fullness of experience, which includes grief and despair, but also love and creation, knowing, having, losing, and more. Anxiety can be marshaled to prevent the self from *being* and *doing*, from experiencing the self’s capacity to live: to do good, evil, or whatever the self would do.

In the case of Adam, whom Kierkegaard wishes to re-insert into history, “the prohibition [‘Do not eat ... ’] induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom’s possibility” (1980, 44–45), implying that Adam can now either do or not do, obey or disobey, eat or not eat. Adam does not yet

know good or evil, but now he is a being and not merely an extension of God's will, now he is able to do, and his ability is anxious.

One of the goals of mature development, as well as psychotherapy, is that a person become able to *be* and *do* by first accepting a certain inability, an inability to change the past, a limit to its possibility. The inability to change the past means accepting who one has been, including the negative parts of oneself and others, and what has been done by or to the self, including the agonizing, lamentable, or traumatic moments of one's history, as parts of a singular life that are not interchangeable with others. In Erikson's words, the goal is "the acceptance of one's own and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be, and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (1980, 104). Naturally, such acceptance is imagined ultimately to reduce anxiety, both in Kierkegaard's and in a more clinical sense of the term, and to replace it with a kind of mourning for what "had to be," for what was and what was not. This mourning, itself, holds out an aim: the aim of

accepting what must be accepted so that the self can find integrity.

Kierkegaard's famous *ecstatic discourse* (1987, 38–39) is not alone in mistaking the goals of mourning, accepting, and integrity for the melancholy pleasure of indifference, the feeling that all experience is equivocal and all acts irrelevant, meaningless:

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. ... Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way.

If potential experience creates *angst*, what could be more ecstatic than to experience all possibilities as inconsequential, interchangeable, futile? One might even resign oneself to the inevitability of “regret” in exchange for this denuding of anxiety, for a false return to the innocence of inexperience. In this light, even repetitions of pain, loss, or disintegration may seem sources of succor, welcome abandonments.

PART 2: *CHARRETTES*
[CHARIOTS]

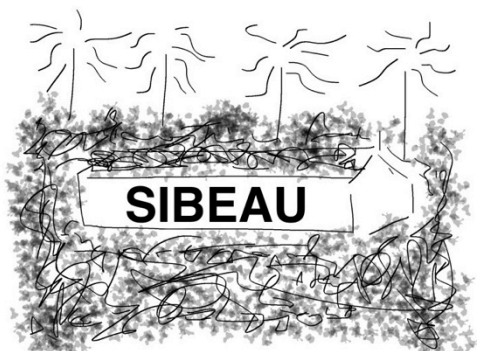
In Porto-Novo, what is artifice and what is nature?

Amidst the trash — *perforce* amidst the trash — you are the building and the tearing down, churning and cessation, dust and ashes.

By day, you push a giant trashbarrow through the muddy *quartier*, picking up human shit, animal carcasses, clumps of rotting food, old coals, cut branches, the occasional plastic bag.

You throw everything in your enormous metal box — moveable oven of roasting waste — wipe off ants, clear your sweat, and return to

the *dépotoir*, which is an open lot once owned by the waste management company, *Sibeau*.



Si/beau means so/beautiful.

Your compatriots work in *dashikis*, without gloves, wading through the variegated shit, ant piles and sewage, rusted cans and shards. One is called *le fou* [the madman] because he works barefooted.

You wear gloves and boots, your *charrette* more or less contains the trash, but you are naked amidst the filth: It covers and crushes you, makes you sick, and releases you from vanity, ease, decadence, irony.

§

If the world is garbage and shit alright if the world is garbage and shit alright if the world is garbage and shit alright if the world is garbage and shit alright.

§

If we are tempted to say that experience may be anything, then to ask ‘What is experience?’ is wretched. ‘What is *not* experience?’ is hardly better. Although thinking is a kind of experience (the experience of thinking), we know what we mean when we say things like: ‘the value of experience,’ or ‘I can’t really describe the experience,’ or ‘He hasn’t yet experienced his loss.’ We emphasize embodiment over abstraction, immediacy over mediation through formulae, theories, or images. If we insist, as Georges Bataille insists, that “one must *live* experience” (1988, 8, Bataille’s emphasis), and not just think about it, we imply: (1) that thinking is distinguishable from living; (2) that lived experience is in certain respects superior to thought-about, contemplated experience; and (3) that thought

endangers, spoils, contaminates, or ruins experience.

§

The Finnish word and unofficial national slogan, *sisu* (pronounced: *see-su*), is typically translated as ‘guts,’ but means neither bravery nor valor. *Sisu* means grit, endurance. Not heroism but persistence, surrender to suffering without surrendering dignity. The Finns insist the word is untranslatable. Of course, every word is both translatable and untranslatable. The vanity of untranslatability, itself, always reveals something about an idea’s aspirations.

Charles Bukowski’s most famous character, Henry Chinaski, while not Finnish, has a sort of *sisu*. Henry’s “got the guts,” permitting him to fight bigger, stronger, and less-intoxicated foes, to suffer beatings without cause, without despair, without need for victory. When told he should stop drinking because “anybody can be a drunk,” Henry replies: “Anybody can be a *nondrunk*. It takes a special talent to be a drunk. It takes endurance. Endurance is more important than truth” (*Barfly*, 1987).

This odd understanding of guts, of *sisu*, implies that guts establish an intentionality behind suffering, that guts defiantly endure, that guts sustain a will to experience and even a will to victimization, and that this strange will either *is* the truth or exceeds it.

Michel de Montaigne's vivid "On Experience" insists that experience be considered a physical and sacred thing. Even when the experience in question is a kind of affliction, as it was for Montaigne, it must first be gutted out, "quietly put up with" (1993, 373), for "we must learn to endure what we cannot avoid" (1965, 835). But Montaigne does not only tolerate his condition: He expressly thanks Fortune for "assailing me so often with the same kind of weapons. She fashions and trains me against them by use, hardens and accustoms me" (1965, 837). In this spirit, Montaigne praises "the first lesson" Mexican parents purportedly give their children: "When they come forth from the mother's womb, their elders greet them with these words: 'Child, you have come into the world to endure. Endure, suffer, and be silent'" (1993, 373).

Of his own kidney stones, Montaigne writes:

Now it has happened again that the slightest movements force the pure blood out of my kidneys. What of it? I do not, just for that, give up moving about as before and pricking after my hounds with youthful and insolent ardor. ... It is some big stone that is crushing and consuming the substance of my kidneys, and my life that I am letting out little by little, not without some natural pleasure, as an excrement that is henceforth superfluous and a nuisance. Do I feel something crumbling? Do not expect me to go and amuse myself testing my pulse and my urine so as to take some bothersome precaution. ... I judge of myself only by actual sensations, not by reasoning. What would be the use, since I intend to apply only waiting and endurance. (1965, 839–840)

Physical suffering, for Montaigne, as for Bukowski, makes experience not just something to be endured, but something worth willing. Experience is worth willing particularly if the experiencing body can “check and steady the frivolity of the mind” (Montaigne

1993, 404). Although disdainful of doctors, Montaigne demands that all norms be *medical* in spirit, referring to the appropriate measures necessary to procure the well-being of their particular objects: “Human justice is formed on the same model as medicine, in which all treatments that are useful are also just and proper” (1993, 351–352). Montaigne even cites the Platonic exhortation that doctors should personally suffer all illnesses they would treat because the most dangerous temptation is to untether the mind from the particularities of lived experience, from the body and its vicissitudes.

Unlike the body, for Montaigne, the mind is unbending and greedy. It treats each of its objects “not according to the nature of the thing, but in accordance with itself. Things in themselves perhaps have their own weights, measures, and states; but inwardly, when they enter into us, the mind cuts them to its own conceptions” (1993, 131). What is worse: “The mind ... does nothing but ferret and search, and is all the time turning, contriving, and entangling itself in its own work, like a silkworm; and there it suffocates, ‘a mouse in pitch.’ ... Its case is much like that of Aesop’s

dogs who, seeing something like a dead body floating in the sea, and being unable to get near it, set about drinking up the water to make a dry passage, and choked themselves” (1993, 347–348).

So deadly and dangerous is thought that Montaigne’s chief intellectual descendent, Ralph Waldo Emerson, claims: “If a man should consider the nicety of the passage of a piece of bread down his throat, he would starve” (2009, 313). “Do not craze yourself with thinking,” Emerson continues, “but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy. Its chief good is for well-mixed people who can enjoy what they find, without question. Nature hates peeping, and our mothers speak her very sense when they say, ‘Children, eat your victuals, and say no more of it’” (314). And: “If we will take the good we find, asking no questions, we shall have heaping measures. The great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway” (2009, 315).

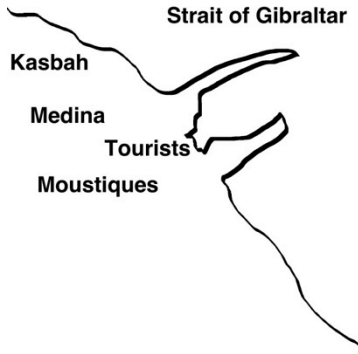
Thus experience hardens, like a stone. If experience may not be questioned, thought about, protested, defied, challenged, or chang-

ed, what one endures becomes one's orthodoxy. This is why those who say that "there is something about the lessons they draw from their experience of life which human beings are reluctant — indeed, often almost unable — to abandon" understate the case (Smail 1984, 93). Rather, we hope that experience will remain real in the present because it is fixed, as it were, in the past. As in the ancient Stoics' *katalepsis* [comprehension, grasping], Montaigne and Emerson petition experience to register its impression upon their bodies as if they were made of wax, to shape their figures, to make a permanent mark, leaving no room for question or doubt. Montaigne's, Emerson's, Bukowski's, and our contemporary notion of experience all find experience's virtue not in its ability to reasonably converse with or spiritually convert us, but in its power to inscribe itself upon us, to transform our bodies, to occupy our guts, to command our subjection.

§

When you debark the hydrofoil from Algeciras on Tangier's ferry port like a sickle, your bleached hair, pierced lip, and Jewish tattooed girlfriend attract six Moroccan guys who keep

repeating: “*Un moustique, c’est mieux que deux*” [One mosquito is better than two]. They mean you must pay one to ‘guide’ you through the city, or else none will let you pass.



There is a curious economy at work, partly resembling the structure of the theoretical game, ‘Stag Hunt,’ where several ‘hunters’ cooperate for a share of a stag that would feed them all, but where each is tempted to chase a rabbit, feeding himself but allowing the stag to escape. Here, unfortunately, you are the stag *and* the rabbit. All play for the opportunity to be the one who feeds on you.

In spite of its theoretical interest and your

American guilt, this is your pre-sub-Saharan holiday, and this sort of extortion pisses you off.

You abruptly refuse.

Your refusal is refused.

You get aggressive and curse, exciting the group immeasurably.

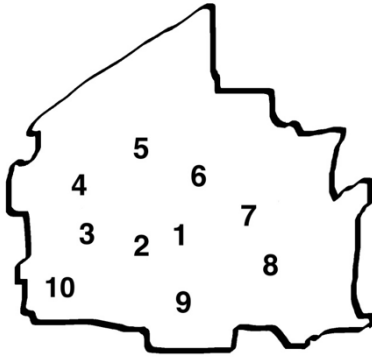
A grinning man flashes an old switchblade and says, in silky English: "I fuck you in the ass."

Eventually, you break free, walk circles around the mad city, only to be spotted later by the main *moustique*. Exhausted, you submit. You are taxied to his uncle's carpet shop, lectured on the timeless value of the Berber rug. Then to his other uncle's restaurant, where you wait two hours for couscous, et cetera.

Days later, in Marrakesh, you are followed around the *Djemaa el-Fna* by two men with ill intent. If you get in a fight or get entangled

with the police, you and she will be gravely harmed.

At this point, the unrelenting heat, the frequent violence, the ubiquitous starving scab-addled café cats, and the near total absence of alcohol make you dread the thought of subjecting yourself to even more experience, dread leaving your girlfriend behind, dread forgetting the gentle banalities of lost familiar places: Paris, New York, Plano, TX:



1. gyprock
2. drywall
3. uncreased bodies
4. torsoposters at the mall

5. chairbacks clawed by fat housecats
softhearted cat-owners are too soft-
hearted to declaw
6. suburban girls who name their cars
Salty Walter or *Louise* (*Weezy* for short)
7. catninetail-lined drainage trenches hicks
call *cricks*
8. weed-whorled silver powertowers' straight
swaths through housing tract after hous-
ing tract
9. cigarette butts slipped past A/C wire-
guards
10. *Kroger* dumpsters full of good-enough
expired pies

§

Along an unlit Cotonou highway steaming
with rain, a man on a motorbike has been hit
by a bus.

A crowd swarms the man, somehow still alive.
His head has been transected.

He will not survive.

The crowd is a horrid symphony; the man's
every twitch sets off paroxysmal *éclats* of shrill

screaming like you have never heard.

In spite of his injury, or because of it, you see the man more clearly than ever.

You move to comfort him, but fail. Paralyzed, you can neither speak nor lower yourself to the ground. You run to the road to beg drivers for transport to a hospital.

One agrees and you carry the blood-covered man to the back seat, his involuntary shudders now producing even louder convulsions from the crowd. A woman faints.

You can't be sure, but you suspect that in one shattering moment the man raised his head, as if to stare daggers at the crowd through the hilts where his eyes would have been, as if to look at you without eyes —

I know. I know. I know. I know. —

and plead for comfort, for mercy.

PART 3: *GLOBUS HYSTERICUS*
[LITERALLY: *HYSTERIC GLOBE*;
MEDICALLY: *THE FEELING OF HAVING A*
LUMP IN ONE'S THROAT]

Whether we consider overwhelming or traumatic experience to be 'pure experience' or the opposite depends on whether we privilege the 'thing itself' or the experiencing subject in understanding 'experience.' If experience requires a person's meaningful integration of events into a sensible form, then unthought, unspoken, undigested experience is no experience at all, but, rather, anti-experience: experience that can not be experienced. To be traumatized, on this view, is to be subjected to an experience that makes experience impossible.

If so, the term ‘unconscious experience,’ used by many thoughtful people (see e.g., Bollas 1997, Ogden 1989), is oxymoronic, for although we are deeply affected by unconscious impulses, associations, and dynamics, to assert that we therefore experience them implies that we must also experience our red blood cells or the Earth’s rotation simply because these, too, affect us. Perhaps it is better to say that some things affect us so thoroughly, so constantly, that we rarely if ever experience them, or, at least, that the effort to experience them is primarily an effort to recognize them and make them conscious.

If, on the other hand, experience lies in the thing or event ‘itself,’ then thinking about it, remembering it, speaking about it, or digesting it risks departing from its ‘reality.’ On this view, the fullest experience would be the experience that incapacitates the self and its ability to think, be, or do. Trauma, then, becomes experience *par excellence*: experience that never fades or dies but tears through time, returning to its center, to the present — now — now — defying distortions of thought, imagination, perspective. It is the latter view

that sanctifies experience in its most intense and violent forms.

Such are the fantasies of experience, of purity and things themselves.

Blessed are the experienced, we say, for they

1. shall be transformed.

Renovated, unhidden, as in apocalypse [*apokalyp-tein*], even amidst ferocious torment.

In truth, persons subjected to traumatic or overwhelming experiences feel changed but not renovated, exposed but not unhidden.

(A Poem About Tom Blackfoot in the Style of a Wesley Willis Song)

When you get back from Benin you get a job as a psychiatric caseworker in Denver, Colorado. / You go to Tom Blackfoot's apartment to see how he is doing. / Tom Blackfoot is a paranoid schizophrenic. / Tom Blackfoot answers the door in his underwear.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot says he has gout because people keep putting peanuts in his lemonade. / Tom Blackfoot tells you lots of shitty things people have done to him his whole life. / Richard Nixon reads Tom's love poems over the radio. / The government follows Tom with telescopes and imposters.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot is about 6 foot 4. / Tom Blackfoot suddenly gets very pissed off. / Tom steps forward and screams goddamn and shit and fuck you. / Later you tell your boss what happened.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Your boss says Tom Blackfoot is dangerous. /
He has to call the hospital guys and cops. /
You say you don't think so but he doesn't
care. / You all go to Tom Blackfoot's apart-
ment and strap him to a gurney.

Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.

They wheel Tom Blackfoot into an ambu-
lance. / Tom screams that you are a fucking
asshole. / They take Tom to a big hospital. /
They keep Tom in the same room for a long
time.

Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.

You understand about Tom Blackfoot. / He is
sick of being violated. / People see the violence in
him. / Someone has to do the screaming.

Tom Blackfoot screams.
Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

Tom Blackfoot screams.

They give Tom Blackfoot hospital medicine that makes him jelly. / Tom Blackfoot has a very terrible time. / You visit Tom Blackfoot but he can't even remember how much he hates you. / Eventually you quit the job and Tom Blackfoot either gets locked up or gets a new caseworker.

2. shall be instructed.

A prominent fantasy holds that experience liberates its disciples from the confines of concept, category, dogma, myth, introducing us, instead, to the truth. But the constituents of even rudimentary experience (space, environment, body) are themselves constructed with the concepts and categories we say we must escape. We use 'experience' to refer to a mode of being that is myth-proof, but myth-proof experience is, of course, a myth.

Like all myths, this myth of experience supports its own special claim to veracity. We imagine we may separate experience (events, moments, occurrences) from thought (language,

discourse, symbolization, narrative). And yet, if experience truly resisted thought and language, there could be *no* learning from experience, no sharing it, no having it. We might not even be capable of producing a word for it.

If this notion of experience were taken to its logical conclusion, we would have to be regularly dumbstruck by experience. Perhaps that is what we desire: to preserve a special realm of sacred experiences, of sacred objects, indefinable yet authoritative, worshipped at great distance yet held intimately, understood physically, unknown conceptually. Not unlike praise of God, praise of experience has much to do with the joy we find in things strong enough to defy our efforts to destroy them.

If we are concerned with the violence the subject commits upon experience, if we dread the subject's ability to stamp things with his seal, if we worry with Montaigne that "the mind cuts [things] to its own conceptions," then overwhelming experience may seem to stamp *us* with *its* seal: a welcome turnabout. Hence our obsession with de-centering subjects, with postmodern ruptures, lacerations, *différences*: Subjects broken by experience can

neither leave experience behind nor twist its truth.

This fantasy of experience insists that we remain bound to what we have experienced. Insistences upon the value of experience are, therefore, insistences upon relating to the objects of experience with an attitude of compliance, in which the goal is to (re)petition powerful, public, and seemingly intractable aspects of reality to mark us, to teach us their lesson. The dream of tutelage by experience involves the dream that in reverential adaptation to reality we will discover a liberation from thinking, since thinking is imagined to be that which separates us from the world, from each other, from God, from the truth.

John Dewey, American pragmatist philosopher and perennially influential pedagogist, in a surprising quasi-Hegelianism, understands experience as a dialectic in which the individual encounters dysfunction or frustration (“primary,” “sense-contact” experience) in attempts to master the environment. The frustrated individual then engages in a process of reflective inquiry to generate “secondary,” “cognitive,” or “intellectual” experiences that re-address objects to

her particular ends (quoted in Singer 1985, 451). Learning from experience, for Dewey, occurs when we reassume mastery of the environment — “Experiencing means living; and ... life goes on by means of controlling the environment” (Dewey 1917, 24) — via attunement, meaning-making, and a kind of domination, when we make the world *work* for us. Of course, this notion is reminiscent of the capitalist myth in which it only appears that the worker masters the machine, manipulating it to produce on his command, when in fact it is the machine and its owner who have mastered the worker, who have trained the worker to move when the machine requires it, who have facilitated the mechanization of the man.

This image, too, is reminiscent of Plato’s metaphor, in *The Republic*, of the great beast who trains his naïve trainer to make a science of the beast’s appetites. The trainer knows what the beast desires and what the beast dislikes, but never thinks to inquire (perhaps he must never inquire, for such inquiries would distract him from his ‘science’) what is truly good for the beast. *The Republic*, itself, may be considered a meditation on experience

and its appetite. The unfortunate English name for the text partly disguises this intention, derived from the Latin *Res publica*, meaning ‘public thing’ or ‘public body,’ whereas the Greek title was *Politeia*, meaning ‘constitution’ — a term with very different medical and political connotations. The difference, for Plato, between *Politeia* and *Res publica* is approximately the difference between philosophy and experience, soul and body, the few and the many, the difficult re-constitution of the *psyche* and the confines of conventional experience.

Do not the pedagogues of experience, in their aversion to classrooms, canons, and disembodied contemplation, convey their intention to replace the orthodoxies of philosophy with the orthodoxy of experience, to bind students to experience and to the ‘real world’ communities that ostensibly contain experience, permitting students and educators alike to share in experience’s glory? The paradoxical objective of such efforts seems to be to generate experiences that release participants from teaching and learning, experiences more instructive than thought or speech (Levine 2002), experiences that initiate students into a *res publica*, that inculcate the worship of certain

social objects of experience, and that connect students' identities to a shared body, in and upon which they shall be instructed.

3. *shall be possessed and dispossessed.*

“To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event,” writes well-known trauma theorist Cathy Caruth (1995, 4–5), for one cannot own one’s own traumata. If trauma is imagined to *comprehend* [to grasp, contain] its victim while resisting comprehension *by* its victim, then one who experiences trauma may be supposed to be the object and not the subject of his experience. Indeed, he may be imagined “to go from the state of being a man to being a brute, to go from the state of being an organism to being an element” (Grenier 1967, 92). This *dispossession*, writes honest and underrated cultural psychologist Jean Grenier, while potentially agonizing, “makes all psychological constraints disappear” (1967, 53), “frees us of everything, and first of all from ourselves” (93). If traumatized states are without past and future, the inhabitant of an eternal traumatic present would seem to be free of the burdens of subjectivity, identity, humanity.

Henry Krystal notes that traumatized persons experience much of life as coming from the outside, from the not-self. “Much of the psychic representation of the ‘enemy’ or ‘oppressor’ or even impersonal elements such as ‘fate’ and clearly personal attributes like one’s own emotions come to be experienced as outside the self-representation. Thus, the post-traumatic state is characterized by an impoverishment of the areas of one’s mind to which the ‘I’ feeling of self-sameness is extended, and a hypertrophy of the ‘not-I’ alienated areas” (1995, 85).

Franz Kafka describes something of this phenomenon in a letter to Max Brod:

Everything I possess is directed against me; what is directed against me is no longer a possession of mine. If, for example — this is purely an example — my stomach hurts, it is no longer really my stomach but something that is basically indistinguishable from a stranger who has taken it in his head to club me. But that is so with everything. I am nothing but a mass of spikes going through me; if I try to defend myself and use force, the spikes

only press in deeper. Sometimes I am tempted to say: God knows how I can possibly feel any more pain, since in my sheer urgency to inflict it upon myself I never get around to perceiving it” (in Karl 1993, 244).

It bears repeating: “In my sheer urgency to inflict [pain] upon myself I never get around to perceiving it.”

Simone Weil argues that the essential question concerning submitting to necessity (which she finds to be inevitable) is whether we will do so in the naked light of truth or by wrapping our submission with lies (2002, 294). Subjection, for Weil, is the natural human condition, no matter how often we deny it. In her view, we must be traumatized by God, must consent to the experience of brutalization, must accept the destruction of our egos, must turn ourselves into ‘others.’ This perspective imitates the naturalness and absurdity of life and thus brings us closer to the truth, the presence and absence of God. In light of the necessity that surrounds us, Weil’s ‘free’ person forms an inner representation of necessity and projects it outward. Hers is an

Idealist position: We are asked to countenance and replicate all defeats and constraints so as not to feel defeated or constrained by them.

Weil goes further by claiming that if the traumatic experience she defines as affliction kills the 'I' from the outside, then the goal must be to first kill the 'I' from the inside, so there is nothing left to die: a preemptive intellectual suicide for the sake of detachment from everything, even God, since God detaches Himself from us. That absurdity, that distance, that pain and absence, when actuated voluntarily, reunite the sufferer with God's essence.

Weil's ultimate experience, affliction, is therefore tremendously violent and tremendously hopeful, uniting disillusionment and transcendence: She describes an agony so shattering that it possesses us completely yet removes at least one half of our souls (1977, 441), enslaves us, welds us to God by crucifying us, takes so much that it *de-creates* us:

Affliction is a marvel of divine technique.

It is a simple and ingenious device to introduce into the soul of a finite creature that immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold. The infinite distance which separates God from the creature is concentrated into a point to transfix the centre of a soul. *The man to whom such a thing occurs has no part in the operation.* He quivers like a butterfly pinned alive to a tray. But throughout the horror he can go on wanting to love. ... The man whose soul remains oriented towards God while a nail is driven through it finds himself nailed to the very centre of the universe; the true centre, which is not in the middle, which is not in space and time, which is God. (1977, 452, emphasis added)

Perhaps the fantasies of pure experience and trauma, of unrepresentable and unthinkable experience, release the self from activity and involvement. Perhaps our reverence for experience derives from its apparent fulfillment of our wish *not* to do or be, to be so brutally possessed and dispossessed that we “never get around to perceiving” the fact that it is we who most often (but not always) inflict experience upon ourselves.

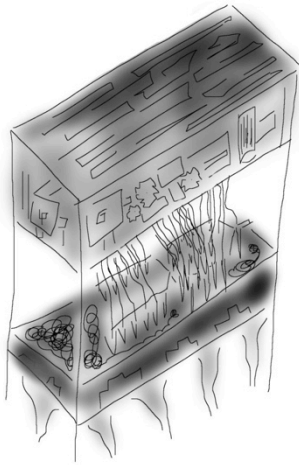
4. *shall be real.*

If experience, particularly traumatic experience, exceeds us, then in experience the self, with its suppositious categories and prejudices, is not there to get in the way. “An overwhelming occurrence ... remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. ... If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history” (Caruth 1995, 5). If trauma is thought to be more reality than we can handle, a disease of history, then the traumatized would seem to be the plagued messengers of truth (see Alford 2011), physically enthralled to the historical realities engraved upon and repeated through their bodies.

Is not the notion of an experience so real as to make us unworthy of its possession without pain the most familiar illusion? “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil” (the opening line of Rousseau’s *Emile*).

In Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” the apparatus of torture and execution (in particular:

the piece of machinery known as “the Harrow”) has been fashioned as a human double: “As you see, the shape of the Harrow corresponds to the human form; here is the harrow for the torso, here are the harrows for the legs. For the head there is only this one small spike” (1971, 146).



The commandment that has been transgressed is carved upon the condemned man’s body by the harrowing human double, by his other, higher, public self. The prisoner is not informed of his crime or his sentence but is meant to *experience* them in his execution.

His crime is expiated when his body absorbs the inscription of the law, when he rediscovers the law by “learn[ing] it on his body” (Kafka 1971, 145).

Those who are condemned have no trial, no sentencing, no defense. The old law, in this metaphor, is the law that *spells guilt*, as it were, even for absurd crimes, such as the condemned man’s crime of not waking every hour to salute his master’s door. Our absurd crimes, apparently, no less than others, bear punishing experience upon and through our bodies. The old law is a sort of primitive experience, perhaps original sin.

In such punishment, the body works backwards through its transgression. The lawful human double (made of glass, translucent, like an angel) kills its vulgar body by inscribing the law upon it, in vengeance for the trauma wreaked by the criminal upon the law and body politic.

Frederick Karl writes, “The apparatus seeks out meaning in the prisoner’s body ... searches for the soul of things, for meaning” (1993, 505), but that is too clever. When the appa-

ratus works, it is the prisoner who searches for meaning in the apparatus, but fails to find it. The prisoner searches the lacerating double for explanation, but finds only the harrowing experience.

Eventually, of course, the Harrow itself breaks down, the machinery disintegrates, the law malfunctions, skips, starts, discourages belief, fails to hold meaning by failing even to kill. The law becomes inarticulate, absurd.

Slavoj Žižek (2012) writes of G.W.F. Hegel's notion of experience that "there nonetheless is a privileged phenomenal mode in which negativity can be experienced, although a negative one: pain. ... Kant determines pain as the only 'a priori' emotion, the emotion of my pathological ego being humiliated by the injunction of the moral law. ... What Heidegger misses in his description of the Hegelian 'experience' as the path of despair (*Verzweiflung*) is the proper abyss of this process: it is not only the natural consciousness that is shattered, but also the transcendental standard, measure, or framing ground against which natural consciousness experiences its inadequacy and failure — as Hegel put it, if

what we thought to be true fails the measure of truth, this measure itself has to be abandoned. ... The ‘transcendental pain’ is not only the pain that natural consciousness experiences, the pain of being separated from its truth; it is the painful awareness that this truth itself is non-all, cracking, inconsistent.”

Of course, if such pain means all measures of truth are lost, this loss is replaced in Hegel’s fantasy with another, higher truth: Absolute Knowing. Although the “transcendental standard” seems demolished, it is imagined to re-enter in the form of pain. The god of trauma overtakes the body, speaks through the broken body as if it were a vessel. In this fantasy, one’s proper destiny is destroyed as if it were a crime. One partakes in a real truth, one bears a traumatic Word upon one’s body, which is, of course, beyond imagination and explanation: more than one can bear.

5. shall be innocent.

When Freud cites Lichtenberg’s joke that “experience consists in experiencing what one does not wish to experience” (1960, 109), we find a profound insight: that part of our

fantasy of experience involves making ourselves innocent of the wish or will to experience (especially in the case of painful experience, for ourselves, for others), leaving experience to be stoically endured as a trial, a lesson, an affliction.

An innocent victim's every act is righteous self-defense. But innocence is difficult to believe. To sustain belief in innocent victimhood requires, paradoxically, that one repeat the experience in the hope that, someday, one will believe one has nothing to do with it.

Weil notes that, unfortunately,

everything happens as though the state of soul appropriate for criminals had been separated from crime and attached to affliction; and it even seems to be in proportion to the innocence of those who are afflicted. If Job cries out that he is innocent in such despairing accents it is because he himself is unable to believe so, it is because his soul within him is on the side of his friends. He implores God himself to bear witness, because he no longer hears the testimony of his own con-

science; it is no longer anything but an abstract, lifeless memory for him. (1977, 442)

6. *shall mean.*

For something to mean in a strict and non-emotional sense, it must have an outside. It would be impossible to conceive the meaning of X if X were all. If the idea of ‘meaning’ were, itself, a part of X, then attempts to define X’s meaning would be circular, self-referential. Nietzsche’s madman asks, “How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?” (1974, 181), in part because the Abrahamic religions were rather successful in creating a meaningful outside. A single, inconstruable, almighty God was more meaningfully outside than a pantheon of semi-human gods and goddesses. *He* could not be ignored, but *He* could not be comprehended. Our incomprehension of *Him* compensated for his comprehension of us.

By a similar logic, to taste death, to feel it, to sample it, even for an instant, seems to reconstitute the possibility of meaning, since if death

may be experienced, then, one imagines, one may glimpse something of life's outside. Efforts to carry death into life may be understood not only as attempts to destroy life but as wrongheaded endeavors to smuggle a prize across life's border. Such attempts are Promethean, but also Orphic.

Carrying death into life takes many forms: narcosis, ecstasy, fashionable post-modern ruptures, but also bloody violence, murder, abuse, degradation, warfare, oppression, genocide. To commit, suffer, or witness these things is thought to expose one to an outside that was formerly unthinkable, to an experience that cannot be comprehended by the resources available on the inside. The promise of this shattering of boundaries, this penetration of one's inside is both the horror and the lure of modern violence, the terror and the fascination at violence, for perpetrators, victims, onlookers, and scholars alike. Of course, the promise is a lie.

Executioners do not glimpse the outside, nor do their victims. Nazi soldiers, by bringing death and living death to millions, did not succeed in traversing a boundary revealing an

unknowable outside beyond life and death. But of course, the false hope that killing or being killed, violating others or being violated, subjecting others or oneself to extraordinary or extreme states of experience will make life meaningful surely produces some facsimile, some poor substitute for the externality we seek.

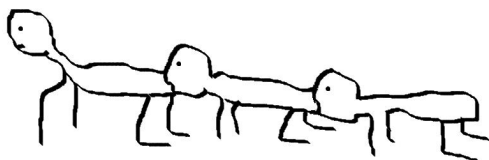
7. *shall be connected.*

Experience to experience, guts to guts. “In a catastrophic age,” writes Caruth, “trauma may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (1995, 11).

The central section of Georges Bataille’s excruciating text, *L’expérience intérieure*, is *Le supplice*, the French word for torture or torment of Latin origin [*supplicare*]. In Bataille’s vision of *supplice*, the subject’s total vulnerability to a stronger party is communicated in *supplication*, an act that affirms the incommensurable difference between power

and powerlessness, wholeness and precariousness. For Bataille, both *supplice* and *supplication* make the subject's will to totality, his "*désir d'être tout*" [desire to be all] unthinkable. Instead, *supplice* and *supplication* preserve the subject's exposure and connection to an overwhelming power, the rupture of the victim's self before the other (1973, 10). "Sovereignty designates the movement of wrenching violence that animates the whole, dissolves into tears, into ecstasy and into bursts of laughter, and reveals the impossible in laughter, ecstasy, or tears" (1948, 277–278).

Bataille here expresses the fantasy that through 'sovereign' acts of violence which, themselves, destroy the autonomy and subjectivity of self and others, somehow a new kind of 'sovereignty' (in this case, the 'sovereignty' of the non-appropriative, non-exploitative group or community) is regained. The fantasy is that abject vulnerability, incapacitation, and boundary-loss create the purest form of connection, and that if only we could all be maximally vulnerable, incapacitated, and unbounded, no one would be able or willing to do anyone any harm. Of course, we might ask: What harm would be left to be done?



Today's college student seems to enjoy bringing up the Dutch cult film, "The Human Centipede," in which a sadistic German doctor sews three victims together, one's mouth to another's anus, to form a human chain, a human centipede.

When you ask (and you always ask) about the source of students' fascination with this film and why such a surprising percentage of students have seen it (compared, for instance, with other Dutch films), a student answers:

"It's about the A-T-M."

"The what?"

"Ass-to-mouth," he replies, suggesting a sexual connotation to the gore that you had not fully considered.

Beyond the sex, or before the sex, although certainly not unrelated to the sex, there is a simpler fascination: The human centipede is a giant gut. Individuals are reduced to their bodies: Their personalities and intellects are immaterial. Bodies are reduced to their guts: Victims' knees are broken so they cannot walk; their eyes and brains and ears and limbs are of no account. Finally, guts are fused into a collective gut, a single, shared digestive tract, at least for a time, until toxic shock and blood poisoning set in. Victims and viewers are united in an atrocious victimhood.

The film traverses the horror and fantasy of being one another's guts, of being nothing but guts, of reducing others to their guts, of gutting our individuality and humanity. Recall that the title is: "The *Human Centipede*." The word, *human*, in this context, is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the film.

The film's tagline reads: "100% medically accurate."

In 2011, a sequel was released: *The Human Centipede II*.

8. *shall have*.

When you committed yourself to going to Africa you said it was “*to have an experience*” (as if you had not yet had one).

By this you meant “*to have pain*” (as if you had not yet had any).

PART 4: ENCRYPTION
[FROM ΚΡΥΠΤΗ, MEANING: SECRET PLACE]

“Ideas of order”¹ are ours to refuse,
although preferring loss may be pathology.²

We dismiss the grave sun (“bull fire”)³ to graze
like bulls on wind (“*ru’et ruah*”),⁴

sacrificing all but ourselves and this
understanding of wind:

that it shifts as we shift, shadowlessly, reconciled
to *hevel*⁵ without aggrandizing complaint.⁶

But, to be clear, none of this bravely.
Not bravely.

¹ Made of ourselves, against “the meaningless plungings of water and the wind” (Stevens 1990, 129).

² Melancholics: lovers of loss, psyches husked in the (black) sun.ⁱ

³ Stevens’ ceremonious sun, “that brave man,”ⁱⁱ was the center of his modernity.

⁴ “*Ru’et ruah*,” from *Koheleth (Ecclesiastes)*, is often rendered: ‘chasing after wind’ or ‘vexation of the spirit.’ It means to pasture, to graze on wind (see Dor-Shav, 2004, 220), to travel with the wind and not the flock toward the next nourishment, to believe the wind’s sustenance.

⁵ *Hevel* is Hebrew for breath, vapor. Cognate with *Abel*, it connotes substancelessness. When *Koheleth* says, “All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2), he says, “All is *hevel*.”

⁶ E.g., “vanity and chasing.”

ⁱ The term “black sun” comes from Gérard de Nerval (“*Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie*”), who hanged himself from a grating on the *rue de la Vieille Lanterne*. Julia Kristeva (1989) used it to mean obsession with impossible maternal return. Melancholy is to burn in black sun, to turn in endless orbit, because, after all, it is still hot with mother’s residue, hissing like mother, still as mother was still, rather than depart for a different dark.

ⁱⁱ “Tomorrow when the sun, / For all your images, / Comes up as the sun, bull fire, / Your images will have left / No shadow of themselves” (Stevens 1990, 198).

§

In the hope of evoking your self, you keep a journal in the second person. In the hope of marking this self, you sketch little pictures next to your words: two bugs copulating, a desiccated palm frond, the road to the *dépotoir*.

You write of your adventure honestly, respectfully, but you also watch and judge yourself. The endeavor turns out to be a bit Foucauldian, a bit *Care of the Self* (1988), a bit self-governmental, but you don't know that yet because you have not yet read that much Foucault.

Instead, you are content with your new relationship, in which you demand honesty, exhort self-sacrifice, bear witness

— *gladly the cross I'd bear bear children grin
and bear it bear weight bear fruit bear
repeating bear gifts bear scrutiny bear
responsibility bear the sins of the father bear
down bear in mind —*

to your secret and strange thoughts and actions.

For this labor you earn a kind of self-love, self-love and good will, good will and confidence. It is a bargain.

§

When there are no bathrooms, no bedrooms, no rooms of any kind, you have to masturbate during ‘showers,’ which begin when you draw a bucket of frigid, foul water from a deep rock well and end when you pour the water over your sunstricken head while hiding behind the largest tree in the yard.

This difficulty inspires the idea that, for once, you are ‘out there,’ having ‘real experiences,’ in ‘the real world,’ where ‘real people’ don’t enjoy private rooms, hot showers, or leisure time to indulge in unproductive luxuries.

One day you come to believe that all the showering and masturbating and sleeping and reading and television-watching you have done in your life is a horrific quantity of inexperience, the result of continual efforts to avoid that which is not familiar, controlled, self-contained. Worse: a definable mass of decadence, a dark substance you have in-

gested and must expel. But your decadence is great and will remain lodged inside you until you expiate it in the agony of sun and labor and sickness and poverty and exhaustion.

When we speak of experience, we mean 'direct,' 'hands-on' experience, which is to be distinguished from the 'indirect,' 'hands-off' experience that is, curiously, disparaged as so much 'intellectual masturbation.' It must be that when we put our 'hands on' experience, we imagine ourselves to be engaged in a sort of coitus, a relationship, a *rendezvous avec l'autre*, whereas when we take our 'hands off,' we are merely alone in the private chambers of our minds, playing with ourselves.

Thinking, it would seem, by ignoring the desired *otherness* and *relatedness* of experience, is accused of onanism, of narcissism, of an un(re)productive withdrawal into the self, a retreat which is thought to ignore living others and their (and our) (re)productive needs. We might even say that thinking is imagined to sterilize or negate the sexual relationships between self, other, and offspring which assure our collective security and survival.

Consider Wallace Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal" (1990, 323, part XII):

He disposes the world in categories, thus:
 The peopled and the unpeopled. In both, he is
 Alone. But in the peopled world, there is,
 Besides the people, his knowledge of them. In
 The unpeopled, there is his knowledge of himself.
 Which is more desperate in the moments when
 The will demands that what he thinks be true?

Is it himself in them that he knows or they
 In him? If it is himself in them, they have
 No secret from him. If it is they in him,
 He has no secret from them. This knowledge
 Of them and of himself destroys both worlds,
 Except when he escapes from it. To be
 Alone is not to know them or himself.

This creates a third world without knowledge,
 In which no one peers, in which the will makes no
 Demands. It accepts whatever is as true,
 Including pain, which, otherwise, is false.
 In the third world, then, there is no pain. Yes, but
 What lover has one in such rocks? ...

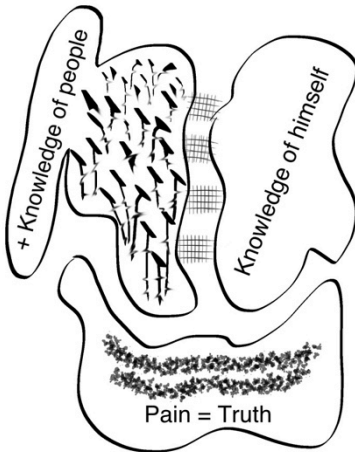
This perplexed agony of mutual interdependence and interpenetration ("Is it himself in them ... or they / In him?") and the impossibility of secrets due to intrusive knowing

seem to make relating impossible: an essential part of a drama predicated on the belief that knowing somehow both neglects and overwhelms the other and the self, destroying the possibility of relating to others in the world.

But what is left once the knowing of self and others is destroyed is not a fertile co-experience but the most desolate of *environs*, an apparent escape from the apparently destructive consumptiveness of thought, but a place where the self can find only unknowable experience (“To be / Alone is not to know”), reunion with “whatever is” and acceptance of “whatever is as true / Including pain.” This thought-less, knowledge-less experience is to be isolated, to be reduced to passivity, to submit to and obey all things, “including pain.” The “third world” is not a world of robust or creative experiencing, but a world without subjectivity, without possibility, without love (“the will makes no / Demands ... / but / What lover has one in such rocks?”).

These reflections sound like confused considerations of the “third area of experiencing” that D.W. Winnicott associated with transitional phenomena, play, and cultural life:

where the self and the not-self, the internal and the external worlds, are creatively bridged and blended (1989, 58). Creativity and play are impossible if they result in (or are feared to result in) intrusions that collapse or erase self-boundaries (i.e., “no secret”). Because transitional phenomena involve a blending of the self and the world, we can become afraid not only of having our secrets stolen but of own power to penetrate others’ and to reconstruct the world according to our whims, to unsettle life’s solidity (i.e., “rocks”).



§

It is no coincidence that in John Guare's stunning play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, much of the action takes place within private residences, while two of the would-be 'victims,' wealthy art dealers Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, frame the narrative by relating their experience at parties and other social gatherings. The relation between social or public histories and the more private, domestic experience that Paul, the charming conman who schemes his way into their apartment and their lives, offers them is at the very heart of the drama. Indeed, in what may be the most important moment of the play, Ouisa blusters that they are turning their engrossing and painful experience with Paul

into an anecdote to dine out on. Or dine in on. But it was an experience. I will not turn him into an anecdote. How do we fit what happened to us in life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you'll mouth over and over years to come. 'Tell the story about the imposter who came into our lives—' 'That reminds me of the time this boy—.' And

we become these human juke boxes spilling out these anecdotes. But it was an experience. How do we keep the experience? (1994, 117–118)

Ouisa gives voice to the common fear that in communicating experience we will lose it, that in profiting from it we will no longer serve it, that in cleaning it up (as Paul cleaned himself up) and making it attractive for guests at a dinner party (as Paul made himself attractive for the Kittredges and their dinner guest), we will no longer honor it. More than the loss of experience, in telling and retelling the experience, Ouisa fears she and her husband are losing their very humanity, their selves, that instead of living, real people, they have become mere “human juke boxes.”

Would simply *not* talking about Paul allow Ouisa to *keep* her experience and, so, to keep her self? Why must she be connected with Paul and her experience of Paul in order to keep herself? Is it necessary for her to remain connected with Paul in a literal sense, perhaps to invite Paul back into her home, although this invitation would surely involve continued suffering and although, at any rate, it is im-

possible because the conman known as Paul has been arrested without Ouisa ever having learned Paul's real name?

Ouisa's fear of transforming her experience into an anecdote with no "teeth," just a "punch line" suggests that, for her, the telling of anecdotes (the word *anecdote* derives from the Greek for 'unpublished secrets') diffuses her private pain, dulls the bite of her experience, disgorges her intimate connection to Paul and the pain she holds inside her, turning her experience and its objects into things she and others can 'dine out on' and, perhaps, 'digest' together. To keep her experience, Ouisa feels she must keep (perhaps somewhere in her guts) the very personal pain associated with it. Do not our homes, on this line of thought, become the places where we house the special pains that permit us to keep hold of our experience?

§

Repeated African illnesses leave you with a moderate hand-washing compulsion (at least this is how you *experience* its origin), beginning several years after you depart the con-

minent, acute in times of private stress, disappearing entirely in moments of public crisis.

Compulsive hand-washing coincides with obsessive contemplation of the dirty things with which we live: trash bins, currency, door-knobs, gas pumps, menus, telephones, and eventually the tendrils of infectiousness extend from your imagination to your body to an elaborate and nearly visible corporeal-fantastical web of all you have touched, and all these items have touched, and all those who have touched these items, and all the items those have touched: The food that descends to the gut has been carried by the fingers that have touched the chair sat on by the body that has knelt on the floor that has been walked on by the feet that have stepped on the rug that has been wiped with the shoes that have marched through roads full of garbage and shit.

Eventually you see that your ablutions are not designed to protect you from the filth of the world but, conversely, to protect others from you (i.e., 'garbage and shit'). You are caught, endeavoring to suppress experience that might

jar garbage loose like dried dirt from a shoe's tread, washing in order to prevent touching more than being touched, repeating and repeating in order to set the dirty, shameful, destructive self apart. In the end, these repetitions become your most substantial connection to Benin, to your sickness, to that experiencing self. They are what you will have taken home, your sole enduring *souvenir*.

Of course, neurotic defenses rarely have their roots in particular experiences of twenty-two-year-olds but, rather, in patterns of experience developed throughout infancy and childhood, meaning even apparently new defenses to apparently new dangers may be in an important sense repetitious. Thus, you seriously reflect upon how you came to be a *ramasseur des ordures* [garbage picker-upper] — sick and soldierly — in the first place.

§

In *The Politics of Experience*, R.D. Laing argues memorably that although “I cannot experience your experience [and] you cannot experience my experience. ... I experience you as experiencing yourself as experienced by me”

(1983, 4–5), and so on. But these possibilities of inter-experience, their impacts on us, and their almost infinite permutations never fully resolve themselves, never lead two or more individuals into a nonproblematic or identical ‘shared experience.’

On the other hand, the trend in ethical theory over the past several decades has been to point out ways that not merely thought, language, identity, and action but experience, personality, embodiment, and affect are not private, but shared, theory-laden, and therefore culturally, historically, and politically constructed. The ‘I’ that writes is not created only by the writer. So, too, the body in the photograph, the embarrassing adolescent memory that still elicits a grimace: These, according to our contemporaries, are not wholly one’s own. To believe they are is to take part in the cult of monadic subjectivity, while to see them as borrowed or shared is to give up on a destructive and isolating fantasy.

Is experience so personal and idiosyncratic that it can never be truly shared? Or is experience so fundamentally constructed and shared that it can never be truly personal,

genuinely private? Why must experience evade either the self or the group? Why is its communicability (either the impossibility of communication or the inevitability of communication) such an important part of our struggle? Does not the mistake that informs this quality of our thought about experience derive from a misunderstanding of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, one in which it is imagined that we must *share* each other's experience in order to respect each other as subjects, i.e., in order not to abuse each other? Instead, we might say that when we regard one another as subjects, we do so on the grounds of difference, of commensurable experience *not* shared (see Levine 2011). Part of the terror of losing experience, then, seems rooted in a false dilemma by which we feel we must choose between concealing our experience or connecting our experience to others' by giving up all that is special about it (i.e., isolating our experience or abusing it), between imposing our experience upon others or ignoring their part in shaping our experience (i.e., destroying their experience or ignoring it).

For all of their sanctification of the first-person and of *epochē* [the bracketing of as-

sumptions], the great phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) permit the verb “to experience” to prop up the noun “experience” in the nominative and accusative. Why we should imagine that “to experience” may generate, yield, or reveal some *thing* called “experience” is not obvious. (Notice, too, how plausible but imprecise verbs like “to generate,” “to yield,” or “to reveal” lubricate the translation of the verb, “to experience,” to the noun, “experience.”) Perhaps we should never say “experience” without pinching ourselves. If experience is not a thing in itself and if we can not experience intransitively — We can not just experience *full stop* — then when we praise experience we must also praise the objects of our experience, whatever they may be: God, nature, power, reality, the community, the body, fortune. We praise not only these objects but the particular manner of relating to these objects that we call ‘experiencing them,’ a manner of relating whose result we call ‘experience.’

§

One month after you return to America, your

parents forward you a letter sent from Abraham. It reads:

Cher Papa et Maman,

Grande est ma joie de vous écrit cette lettre rien que pour vous saluer; comment vous vous portez. Vous écrit est une joie parce que j'ai eu le privilège de connaître votre fils Mathieu qui a été avec moi durant son séjour en Afrique précisément au Benin (Porto-Novo).

Mathieu est très gentille et sage et correcte; ce qui ma permis de dit que il a des bons parents. Papa Maman je vous aime beaucoup et très heureux de connaître votre enfant qui a été un vrai ami; Mathieu une donne des conseil dans ma vie surtout quand je suis découragé il a réjouie.

Mathieu a été à Natitingou connaître mes parents et les frères; je suis content Papa Maman je vous aime et je dois vous connaître voila pourquoi j'écrit pour informe que j'aime toute votre famille.

Quand j'ai constaté le voyage de Mathieu, j'étais vraiment découragé mais je vous aime.

*Au revoir Papa Maman,
Mouru Abraham*

[Dear Dad and Mom,

Great is my joy to write you if only to greet you; how are you? It is a joy to write you because I have had the privilege of knowing your son Matthew, who was with me during his stay in Africa, precisely in Benin (Porto-Novo).

Matthew is very nice and wise and proper; which permits me to say he has good parents. Dad Mom I love you very much and am very happy to know your child who has been a true friend; Matthew gave me advice in my life especially when I was discouraged he cheered me up.

Matthew was in Natitingou to meet my parents and brothers; I am glad Dad

Mom I love you and I would like to meet you that is why I write to tell you I love all your family.

When I realized Matthew was leaving, I was truly discouraged but I love you.

Goodbye Dad Mom,
Mouru Abraham]

You are troubled by this otherwise touching letter because it is addressed to your parents, and not to you, and because it may or may not include a plea to invite Abraham to America to live with you, to be a part of your family.

Surely, Abraham could not be blamed for making such a plea. And yet, does his letter mean that your friendship was something other than friendship? Does it mean that you shared nothing of your experience, that you and he were merely exploiting each other, you for an exotic experience, him for the hope of escape? Or does it suggest that you shared too much, experienced too much, took or gave too much?

You recall the way old men and young boys

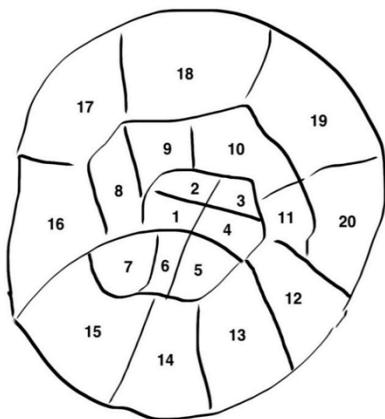
constantly taunted you, followed you through markets and roads shouting “*Yobo! Yobo! Yobo!*” [White! White! White!], which of course reminded you of the legacy white invaders have left in places like Benin, and of the fact that you were another white invader in a long line.

You recall the way Abraham and you walked around town holding hands, as is the custom for male friends, and of the evening when the inevitable cries of *Yobo* began and Abraham exploded: “*E no nyi Yobo ā!*” [His name is not Yobo!].

You remember your terror at the thought that you had made a terrible mess of Abraham’s life, had attached yourself to him in a way that set him at odds with his own experience, had somehow interrupted or interfered with his pressing concerns (employment, housing, marriage), had somehow implied a promise impossible to keep.

PART 5: (RE)PETITION

Of Paris,



il n'y a plus de centre ville [there is no longer a center], although walls around the *ancien régime* do not come down.

§

After Benin, the mere idea of the *Jardin des Plantes* is a farce. As you enter, you think, *the world is not important*, and recall the stanza that begins, “*Livre de toutes sortes de fleurs d’après nature. / All sorts of flowers. That’s the sentimentalist,*” from Stevens’ *Esthétique du Mal* (1990, 316), referring to the title of seventeenth-century painter Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer’s famous book of floral engravings, engravings used in the design of many English tapestries, memories of photographs of which quickly eclipse all memory of the flora of Benin.

§

The musical symbol for the sign [*segno*] is this:



It is difficult to repeat [*dal segno al fine*] without a slight *stringendo* [tightening, acceleration].

§

Duns Scotus writes (cruelly): “*Isti, qui negant aliquod ens contingens, exponendi sunt tormentis quousque concedant, quod possibile est eos non torqueri.*” [Those who deny contingency should be tortured until they concede that it is possible that they might not have been tortured] (1987, 9).

§

In Lucian’s sardonic *Sale of the Philosophers*, Pyrrhias the Skeptic, to be sold as a cut-rate slave, admits he would be lousy at catching his master’s runaways because, of course, he can’t “apprehend” [*katalambano*] anything (Saunders 1994, 196).

§

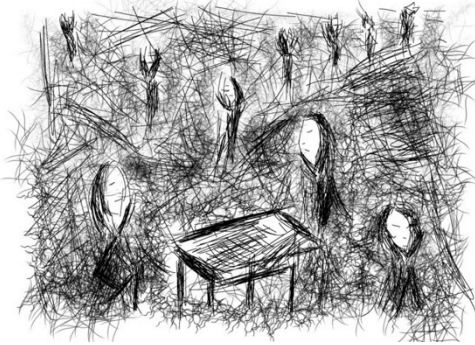
A man walks around alone.

You doubt he prefers it to sitting, at home, in comfort.

If you did not doubt,
you would be forced to walk around alone.

If you did not prefer nor do what you prefer,
you would be forced to walk around alone.

Comme ça,
the fibres of the self conspire.



A man imagines a lifeless world.
Or you imagine he imagines it.

You dream its single color everywhere
and, together, hear the repetitions of its solemn sound.
At first, you hate to live in it,
but what is quiet and divine of you

becomes contented to repeat there
and to be repeated there

among that lifeless whole.

§

Experience marks an important point of contention between psychoanalytic psychologists and anti-psychiatrists. Take, for example, the experience of sitting in a quiet café and suddenly feeling that people want to harm or kill you. This experience is not unknown to those who suffer from anxiety or panic; perhaps it is not unknown to anyone.

The psychoanalytic psychologist might claim that, so long as the café environment is actually safe and non-lethal, this experience derives from an unconscious desire within the self to harm or kill the self or others, a desire projected out into the world and experienced as if besetting the self. The experience of threatening terror is in some sense an error, an error of time or place, or an error of person or direction.

The anti-psychiatrist, on the other hand, may claim that interpersonal experience (which is a fundamental and influential sort), even what appears to be the relatively benign experience of sitting in a café, is replete with threats of harming or killing, although not often in a

literal or physical sense. David Smail (1984, 46–47), notably, argues that experiences of vulnerability to psychic annihilation are the result of an “intuitive sensibility” to the precariousness of our selves before others, a sensibility we typically repress yet one that remains semi-consciously perceptible, even at a table in a café. Anti-psychiatrists argue that much of our experience is social, and that social experience makes us vulnerable to a particularly terrifying sort of *not being* — *not being* good enough, *not being* identifiable or appropriate, *not being* what others are looking for. *Not being* is a kind of death, a kind of annihilation of the self.

Of course, the perspectives of the psychoanalytic psychologist and the anti-psychiatrist can, to some degree, be united: If you suffer or have suffered real or imagined experiences of psychic harm or annihilation, you may not only accurately perceive this threat in past and present experiences, but may also reasonably experience a desire to defend and/or avenge yourself with respect to those who threaten(ed) you.

But the question of experience remains, even

as it becomes a question of emphasis: How much of the threatening quality of experience shall we attend to? Is the experience of the threat accurate or misplaced? To what degree is sensitivity to the self's vulnerability normal, abnormal, healthy, unhealthy? Is it helpful to describe a precarious sense of self as pathological? If so, is it the pathology of the individual who experiences life thus, or of the social group that helps shape these dynamics, or both?

For psychoanalytic psychologists, *being* oneself with others is not only possible but essential to self-development, psychological health, and social functioning (all of which reinforce each other). The psychoanalytic psychologist would say that if one has a precarious or evanescent sense of *being*, then one is not able to meaningfully bring oneself into the world and meaningfully do things there. One who *is* insecurely lives under the constant threat of annihilation and can only venture those actions and interactions that protect the self (usually grounded in rigidly defended, compliant, or foreclosed versions of the self) from danger. The suggestion that social reality *necessarily* involves the threat of

annihilation would mean, to the psychoanalytic psychologist, not that the person doing the suggesting has accurately perceived the reality of social intercourse, but that he or she has a fragile or poorly developed ego or self. The fact that some people do not, or do not seem to, experience social life as inherently threatening means, to the psychoanalytic psychologist, that, while all have not, some of us have *achieved being*, an achievement upon which the self can rely for security and vitality, upon which the self can build further experience.

For anti-psychiatrists, particularly those of the existentialist variety, the idea of *being* is, itself, the problem. Smail details the contemporary mythology of self-objectivity in which people are thought to “have selves” with static, solid personalities that define who they *are* (1984, 80). The difficulty in maintaining this illusion of being and the fearsome consequences for failure on this front contribute substantially to people’s anxiety. If social life relies on objective being, on predictable beings doing predictable things, on selves with cogent identifying features, stable across time and space, then any experience in which this type of

being is challenged may be risky.

According to anti-psychiatrists, the notion that individuals are beings with stable identities, themselves built upon the ‘possession’ of certain experiences relies on *mauvaise foi* [bad faith], which means the refusal to acknowledge the fullness of freedom. Sartre’s example in *Being and Nothingness* is of a waiter who is too waiteresque, who has made himself into a creature called “Waiter,” which is in some sense an objective and socially co-constructed *thing* (1993, 166–169). To the extent that he *is* “Waiter,” he avoids in *mauvaise foi* the reality of his subjectivity, his freedom to choose, to act, to do and to be other than “Waiter” at any moment.

All those who would play the game of *being* must play at being fixed and consistent selves with relatively predictable coordinates, recognizable and locatable (by the self and by others), such that our *beings* are never (or rarely) questioned. On this line of thought, the disavowal of the fact that we play this game of being, along with the disavowal of the fact that those who fail at this game experience something akin to an annihilation of

their identities, become, themselves, markers of success within the game: Those who successfully suppress their sensitivity to the threatening, frightening aspects of social experience seem the most normal, functional, pleasant.

One question of experience, then, is the question of whether experience will solidify our identities or threaten our selves. One fantasy of experience holds that experience liberates us from social vulnerability, that once we 'have experience,' we will no longer need social approval, recognition, acceptance, even love. It is surprising how often this fantasy of self-strength coincides with a darker fantasy that experience will save us from fear by inaugurating exactly what is both feared and desired: that our experience will mark us forever, change us into something new, kill our selves as we know them.

§

Leaving Benin is the same as arriving. You make it back to Douala, Cameroon. You are told your ticket to Paris is no good. You must buy a new one. Cash only.

You are being fucked. You haggle. You protest. Finally, you threaten the *Directeur* with an absurd lie: that your uncle works for the U.S. Secretary of Defense, which, happily, sounds terrifying in French: “*La Ministère de la Défense de l’Amérique!*” You receive a promise: next open flight. Could be a week.

You sleep on airport chairs for three nights. Finally you have to get a room. The only hotel that will charge a memorized American credit card number is the four-star *Hotel Sawa*. You check in at the exorbitant price, dine on steak and Cabernet, salad with Roquefort, asparagus with butter, cheese and fresh bread, chicken cordon blue, fried dumplings, salmon, beer, eggs, nuts, tarts, sorbet, and scotch. You sleep in a clean, white bed. You watch television on forty different channels, follow the news on CNN World. You masturbate in hot showers.

You feel wretched, physically safe but thoroughly anxious, physically comfortable but internally vulnerable, normal but disgusted.

You fantasize about returning to Benin, living in less comfort again, going somewhere where

you can stop departing, stop not having experiences, stop not growing a beard, stop not being burned by the sun.

PART 6: *AKATALEPSIA*
[NOT GRASPING]

You land in Paris and check into a youth hostel.

Clothes look cleaner than before.

Car doors open and shut.

For the next seventeen years you will revise a poem about a defunct carousel you see on this day. You won't be able to get it right because you will keep lying about everything, about what it was, about what you wished it were.

The truth is that the carousel sat still,
covered with tarps and leaves,
in the small park near the *Place de la République*.

The finitude of experience is real.
Its contingencies and limits
are a kind of pain.

People smoked by it.

This pain, no matter how exquisite,
can not outstrip experience's finitude.

Tourists stumbling back to the *Crowne Plaza*
glanced at it, disappointed.

Contemplation of this pain
and its alternatives
can not eclipse pain,
only balance it.

It inspired nothing but an impulse to remark
the empty, to fend off profounder emptiness.

Not infinity or possibility but
boundedness,
the balance between what is real
and what is not,
is the shock of freedom
and the dread of responsibility
for moments, deeds,
pains, and pleasures,

chosen, suffered,
appreciated, regretted.

You wrote something about “notenoughness,”
which implied an enlightened attitude
toward insufficiency and lack.

It is tempting to transform
this shock and dread
into a personal ecstasy,
not a necessary evil
tolerated as the wage of being real,
but a selfish *souffrance*,
a lacerating crisis
of indifference
that resembles being alive.

You wrote,
“The hotel is the same as the world:
à la fin tu es là” [in the end, there you are],
which contained a charming reference to
Apollinaire’s “Zone”
 (“*à la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien*”)
that few would be likely to get.

That would be the lie.

§

You return to your favorite café.

You eat a croque monsieur, stare at the sidewalk of the *rue Cambronne*, and want to throw up.

You are astounded by the amount of glass around the bar, the *comptoir d'étain*, the ornate tables, the plastic ashtray holding the tiny *reçu* in place, the people moving precisely from sitting to standing, silence to speech, gazing to staring.

You immediately forget everything about Benin.

Rather, you remember everything, but not as if it were true.

Even the terror associated with this forgetting vanishes quickly, fades into mere anxiety that there will be no lesson, just fragments, disgorged dreams dissolved into nonsense.

You begin to think about cash, about sex, about a job, about your flight back to Amer-

ica, about your stuff in a closet on the *rue de Chevreuse*, about what you will say of your experience, about getting a tetanus shot, about ordering another *café crème*, about your haircut: about one hundred things of no importance.

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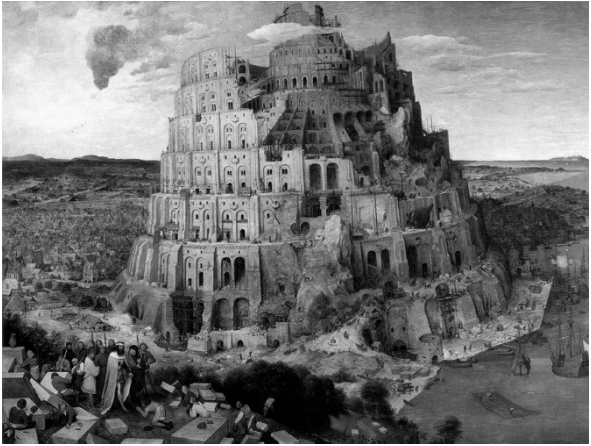
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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of
thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of
a thought-army, a thought-pack, which would
storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament.

He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical
steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-
outsiders. What distance would shine in their
eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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