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E xperience and Poverty

Our childhood anthologies used to contain the fable of the old man who, on his deathbed, fooled his sons into believing that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They would only have to dig. They dug, but found no treasure. When autumn came, however, the vineyard bore fruit like no other in the whole land. They then perceived that their father had passed on a valuable piece of experience: the blessing lies in hard work and not in gold. Such lessons in experience were passed on to us, either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice, all the while we were growing up: “Still wet behind the ears, and he wants to tell us what’s what!” “You’ll find out [*erfahren*] soon enough!” Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside.—Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring? Who can still call on a proverb when he needs one? And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?

No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. Perhaps this is less remarkable than it appears. Wasn’t it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience? And what poured out from the flood of war books ten years later was anything

but the experience that passes from mouth to ear. No, there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.

With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind. And the reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely—ideas that have come with the revival of astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism. For this is not a genuine revival but a galvanization. We need to remind ourselves of Ensor's magnificent paintings,¹ in which the streets of great cities are filled with ghosts; philistines in carnival disguises roll endlessly down the streets, wearing distorted masks covered in flour and cardboard crowns on their heads. These paintings are perhaps nothing so much as the reflection of the ghastly and chaotic renaissance in which so many people have placed their hopes. But here we can see quite clearly that our poverty of experience is just a part of that larger poverty that has once again acquired a face—a face of the same sharpness and precision as that of a beggar in the Middle Ages. For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience? Where it all leads when that experience is simulated or obtained by underhanded means is something that has become clear to us from the horrific mishmash of styles and ideologies produced during the last century—too clear for us not to think it a matter of honesty to declare our bankruptcy. Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors. Such a constructor was Descartes, who required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than the single certitude, "I think, therefore I am." And he went on from there. Einstein, too, was such a constructor; he was not interested in anything in the whole wide world of physics except a minute discrepancy between Newton's equa-

tions and the observations of astronomy. And this same insistence on starting from the very beginning also marks artists when they followed the example of mathematicians and built the world from stereometric forms, like the Cubists, or modeled themselves on engineers, like Klee.² For just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys the needs above all of the engine, Klee's figures too seem to have been designed on the drawing board, and even in their general expression they obey the laws of their interior. Their interior, rather than their inwardness; and this is what makes them barbaric.

Here and there, the best minds have long since started to think in these terms. A total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it—this is its hallmark. It makes no difference whether the poet Bert Brecht declares that Communism is the just distribution of poverty, not of wealth, or whether Adolf Loos, the forerunner of modern architecture,³ states, “I write only for people who possess a modern sensibility . . . I do not write for people consumed by nostalgia for the Renaissance or the Rococo.” A complex artist like the painter Paul Klee and a programmatic one like Loos—both reject the traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past. They turn instead to the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present. No one has greeted this present with greater joy and hilarity than Paul Scheerbart.⁴ There are novels by him that from a distance look like works by Jules Verne.⁵ But quite unlike Verne, who always has ordinary French or English gentlemen of leisure traveling around the cosmos in the most amazing vehicles, Scheerbart is interested in inquiring how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures. Moreover, these creatures talk in a completely new language. And what is crucial about this language is its arbitrary, constructed nature, in contrast to organic language. This is the distinctive feature of the language of Scheerbart's human beings, or rather “people”; for humanlikeness—a principle of humanism—is something they reject. Even in their proper names: Peka, Labu, Sofanti, and the like are the names of the characters in the book *Lesabéndio*, titled after its hero. The Russians, too, like to give their children “dehumanized” names: they call them “October,” after the month of the Revolution; “Pyatiletka,” after the Five-Year Plan; or “Aviakhim,” after an airline. No technical renovation of language, but its mobilization in the service of struggle or work—at any rate, of changing reality instead of describing it.

To return to Scheerbart: he placed the greatest value on housing his “people”—and, following this model, his fellow citizens—in buildings befitting their station, in adjustable, movable glass-covered dwellings of the kind since built by Loos and Le Corbusier.⁶ It is no coincidence that glass is such

a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed. A cold and sober material into the bargain. Objects made of glass have no “aura.” Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession. The great writer André Gide once said, “Everything I wish to own becomes opaque to me.” Do people like Scheerbart dream of glass buildings because they are the spokesmen of a new poverty? But a comparison will perhaps reveal more than theory.⁷ If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, “You’ve got no business here.” And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark—the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire. A neat phrase by Brecht helps us out here: “Erase the traces!” is the refrain in the first poem of his *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner* [Reader for City-Dwellers]. Here in the bourgeois room, the opposite behavior became the norm. And conversely, the *intérieur* forces the inhabitant to adopt the greatest possible number of habits—habits that do more justice to the interior he is living in than to himself. This is understood by everyone who is familiar with the absurd attitude of the inhabitants of such plush apartments when something broke. Even their way of showing their annoyance—and this affect, which is gradually starting to die out, was one that they could produce with great virtuosity—was above all the reaction of a person who felt that someone had obliterated “the traces of his days on earth.”⁸ This has now been achieved by Scheerbart, with his glass, and by the Bauhaus, with its steel. They have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces. “It follows from the foregoing,” Scheerbart declared a good twenty years ago, “that we can surely talk about a ‘culture of glass.’ The new glass-milieu will transform humanity utterly. And now it remains only to be wished that the new glass-culture will not encounter too many enemies.”

Poverty of experience. This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty—their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty—that it will lead to something respectable. Nor are they ignorant or inexperienced. Often we could say the very opposite. They have “devoured” everything, both “culture and people,” and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them. No one feels more caught out than they by Scheerbart’s words: “You are all so tired, just because you have failed to concentrate your thoughts on a simple but ambitious plan.” Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day—a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for

contemporary man.⁹ His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon. And now we need to step back and keep our distance.

We have become impoverished. We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another, and have often left it at the pawnbroker's for a hundredth of its true value, in exchange for the small change of "the contemporary." The economic crisis is at the door, and behind it is the shadow of the approaching war. Holding on to things has become the monopoly of a few powerful people, who, God knows, are no more human than the many; for the most part, they are more barbaric, but not in the good way. Everyone else has to adapt—beginning anew and with few resources. They rely on the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation. In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good. Let us hope that from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses, who one day will repay him with compound interest.

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Notes

1. James Sydney Ensor (1860–1949) was a Belgian painter and printmaker whose works are known for their troubling fantasy, explosive colors, and subtle social commentary.
2. Paul Klee (1879–1940), Swiss painter, was associated in the teens with the group *Der Blaue Reiter*, which formed around Wassily Kandinsky. Klee was an instructor in the painting workshop at the Bauhaus between 1921 and 1931.
3. Adolf Loos (1870–1933), Austrian architect, was an important precursor of the

International Style. An influential essayist and social commentator, his attack on ornament drew broad attention in Europe before World War I.

4. Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915), German author, produced poetry and prose oriented toward a gently fantastic science fiction. In 1919, Benjamin wrote an unpublished review of his novel *Lesabéndio* (1913). Scheerbart's book *Glasarchitektur* (Glass Architecture), produced in collaboration with the architect Bruno Taut, was one of the inspirations for the present essay.
5. Jules Verne (1828–1905), French author, wrote remarkably popular novels which laid much of the foundation for modern science fiction.
6. Le Corbusier (pseudonym of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret; 1887–1965) was a Swiss architect and city planner whose designs combine the functionalism of the modernist movement with a bold, sculptural expressionism.
7. Compare the following passage with "Short Shadows (II)," in this volume.
8. J. W. von Goethe, *Faust, Part II*, lines 11,583–84: "The trace of my days on earth cannot perish in eons."
9. Compare the fragment "Mickey Mouse" (1931), in this volume.

CHAPTER III

HAVING AN EXPERIENCE

EXPERIENCE occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living. Under conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects and elements of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges. Oftentimes, however, the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. We put our hands to the plow and turn back; we start and then we stop, not because the experience has reached the end for the sake of which it was initiated but because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy.

In contrast with such experience, we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience.

Philosophers, even empirical philosophers, have spoken for the most part of experience at large. Idiomatic speech, however, refers to experiences each of which is singular, having its own beginning and end. For life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own

particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeated quality pervading it throughout. A flight of stairs, mechanical as it is, proceeds by individualized steps, not by undifferentiated progression, and an inclined plane is at least marked off from other things by abrupt discreteness.

Experience in this vital sense is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being "real experiences"; those things of which we say in recalling them, "that *was* an experience." It may have been something of tremendous importance—a quarrel with one who was once an intimate, a catastrophe finally averted by a hair's breadth. Or it may have been something that in comparison was slight—and which perhaps because of its very slightness illustrates all the better what is to be an experience. There is that meal in a Paris restaurant of which one says "that *was* an experience." It stands out as an enduring memorial of what food may be. Then there is that storm one went through in crossing the Atlantic—the storm that seemed in its fury, as it was experienced, to sum up in itself all that a storm can be, complete in itself, standing out because marked out from what went before and what came after.

In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors.

Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have *an* experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation. Continued acceleration is breathless and prevents parts from gaining distinction. In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so—just as in a genial conversation

there is a continuous interchange and blending, and yet each speaker not only retains his own character but manifests it more clearly than is his wont.

An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it. In discourse *about* an experience, we must make use of these adjectives of interpretation. In going over an experience in mind *after* its occurrence, we may find that one property rather than another was sufficiently dominant so that it characterizes the experience as a whole. There are absorbing inquiries and speculations which a scientific man and philosopher will recall as "experiences" in the emphatic sense. In final import they are intellectual. But in their actual occurrence they were emotional as well; they were purposive and volitional. Yet the experience was not a sum of these different characters; they were lost in it as distinctive traits. No thinker can ply his occupation save as he is lured and rewarded by total integral experiences that are intrinsically worth while. Without them he would never know what it is really to think and would be completely at a loss in distinguishing real thought from the spurious article. Thinking goes on in trains of ideas, but the ideas form a train only because they are much more than what an analytic psychology calls ideas. They are phases, emotionally and practically distinguished, of a developing underlying quality; they are its moving variations, not separate and independent like Locke's and Hume's so-called ideas and impressions, but are subtle shadings of a pervading and developing hue.

We say of an experience of thinking that we reach or draw a conclusion. Theoretical formulation of the process is often made in such terms as to conceal effectually the similarity of "conclusion" to the consummating phase of every developing integral experience. These formulations apparently take their cue from the separate propositions that are premisses and the proposition that is the conclusion as they appear on the printed page. The impression is derived that there are first two independent

The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us. For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated. Indeed, his incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim. As long ago as 1933 Benjamin had accurately diagnosed this 'poverty of experience' of the modern age; he located its origins in the catastrophe of the First World War, from whose battlefields:

men returned . . . grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience . . . What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.¹

Today, however, we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice. For modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience. Neither reading the newspaper, with its abundance of news that is irretrievably remote from his life, nor sitting for minutes on end at the wheel of his car in a traffic jam. Neither the journey through the nether world of the subway, nor the demonstration that suddenly blocks the street. Neither the cloud of tear gas slowly dispersing between the buildings of the city centre, nor the rapid blasts of gunfire from who knows where; nor queuing up at a business counter, nor visiting the Land of Cockayne at

the supermarket, nor those eternal moments of dumb promiscuity among strangers in lifts and buses. Modern man makes his way home in the evening wearied by a jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience.

It is this non-translatability into experience that now makes everyday existence intolerable – as never before – rather than an alleged poor quality of life or its meaninglessness compared with the past (on the contrary, perhaps everyday existence has never been so replete with meaningful events). It is not until the nineteenth century that we find the first literary indications of this everyday oppressiveness, and certain well-known pages of *Sein und Zeit* on the ‘banality’ of the quotidian (in which European society between the wars was all too ready to recognize itself) would simply have made no sense even just a century earlier, but this is precisely because the everyday – not the unusual – made up the raw material of experience which each generation transmitted to the next. Hence the unreliability of travellers’ tales and medieval bestiaries; in no sense ‘fantastical’, they merely demonstrate that the unusual could not in any way be translated into experience. Each event, however commonplace and insignificant, thus became the speck of impurity around which experience accrued its authority, like a pearl. For experience has its necessary correlation not in knowledge but in authority – that is to say, the power of words and narration; and no one now seems to wield sufficient authority to guarantee the truth of an experience, and if they do, it does not in the least occur to them that their own authority has its roots in an experience. On the contrary, it is the character of the present time that all authority is founded on what cannot be experienced, and nobody would be inclined to accept the validity of an authority whose sole claim to legitimation was experience. (The youth movements’ denial of the merits of experience is eloquent proof of this.)

Hence the disappearance of the maxim and the proverb, which were the guise in which experience stood as authority. The slogan, which has replaced them, is the proverb of humankind to whom experience is lost. This does not mean that today there are no more experiences, but they are enacted outside the individual. And it is interesting that the individual merely observes them,

continual opposition of diachronic and synchronic, historical and structural, in which it is possible to grasp as some kind of *Ur-event*, or *Urfaktum*, the unity–difference of invention and gift, human and non-human, speech and infancy. This is what Hamann does most categorically – albeit allegorically – when he defines human language as ‘translation’ from divine language, and thus identifies the origin of language and of knowledge in a *communicatio idiomatum* between human and divine.

Such a concept of origins is not in the least abstract, nor purely hypothetical; on the contrary, the science of language can produce concrete examples of it. For what is the Indo-European root, reinstated through philological comparison of the historical languages, if not an origin? An origin not merely pushed backwards in time, but equally representing a present, operative instance in the historical languages? It is located in a convergence of diachronic and synchronic, where, as a historically unattested state of the language – as ‘never spoken language’, yet still real – it guarantees both the intelligibility of linguistic history and the synchronic coherence of the system. An origin such as this can never be completely resolved through ‘events’ supposed historically to have occurred; it is something that has not yet ceased to occur. We can define this dimension as that of a *transcendental history*, which in a sense constitutes the *a priori* limit and structure of all historical knowledge.

It is on this model that we must view the relationship between language and a pure, transcendental experience which, like human infancy, is free both of the subject and of any psychological substratum. It is not simply an event to be isolated chronologically, nor anything like a psychosomatic state which either child psychology (at the level of *parole*) or palaeo-anthropology (at the level of *langue*) could ever construct as a human event independent of language. However, it is not even something that can be wholly resolved within language, except as a transcendental source or an Ur-limit in the sense already referred to. *In terms of human infancy, experience is the simple difference between the human and the linguistic. The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant – this is experience.* But that there is in this sense an infancy of the individual, that there is a difference between the human and linguistic, is not an event on a par with others in the realm of human history, or a simple characteristic among many that

identify the species *Homo sapiens*. Infancy has its effect first and foremost on language, constituting it and conditioning it in an essential way. For the very fact that infancy exists as such – that it is, in other words, experience as the transcendental limit of language – rules out language as being in itself totality and truth. If there was no experience, if there was no infancy, language would undoubtedly be a ‘game’ in Wittgenstein’s sense, its truth coinciding with its correct usage according to logical rules. But from the point where there is experience, where there is infancy, whose expropriation is the subject of language, then language appears as the place where experience must become truth. In other words infancy as Ur-limit in language emerges through constituting it as the site of truth. What Wittgenstein posits, at the end of the *Tractatus*, as the ‘mystical’ limit of language is not a psychic reality located outside or beyond language in some nebulous so-called ‘mystical experience’, it is the very transcendental origin of language, nothing other than infancy. *The ineffable is, in reality, infancy*. Experience is the *mysterion* which every individual intuits from the fact of having an infancy. This mystery is not an oath of silence or mystical ineffability; on the contrary, it is the vow that commits the individual to speech and to truth. Just as infancy destines language to truth, so language constitutes truth as the destiny of experience. Truth is not thereby something that can be defined within language, nor even outside it, as a given fact or as an ‘equation’ between this and language: infancy, truth and language are limited and constituted respectively in a primary, historico-transcendental relation in the sense already noted.

But infancy has another, more decisive consequence for language. It sets up in language that split between *language* and *discourse* which exclusively and fundamentally characterizes human language. For the fact that there is a difference between language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*), and that it is possible to pass from one to the other, and that each speaking individual is the site of this difference and this passage, is neither natural nor self-evident, but the central phenomenon of human language. Only now, thanks once more to Benveniste’s studies, do we begin to discern this problematic, and its importance as the essential task with which any future science of language will be put to the test. It is not language in general that marks out the human from other living beings – according to the Western metaphysical

ways is that you begin with these tiny packages of experiential knowledge and that, next, something “great” or more complex, a scientific theory of historical narrative, can perhaps be built out of these elementary building blocks. And precisely this is where things ordinarily go right in the sciences but tend to go wrong in history and why the constructivists are so skeptical about the possibility of an experiential knowledge of the past itself, whereas they are so much less likely to cherish such defeatist worries about scientific theories. In sum, the constructivist’s argument both presupposes and enhances the assumption that experiential knowledge always comes to us in these tiny packages and that we could never have experiential knowledge of something that is complex, comprehensive, and overwhelming. This is, of course, a typically positivist dogma and the kind of intuition of which you may expect to find variants in the writings of any positivist philosopher.

But as soon as the nature of the dogma is clearly written down, you will immediately become aware of its being, indeed, a mere dogma. Suppose you encounter a person. Is a person not a most complex and comprehensive object? Or think of what you are actually seeing when looking at the sky at a clear night or of what you are doing when reading a book. In all these cases you will have to do with complex objects. And apart from the scientific experiment, complexity seems to be the rule rather than the exception in our experience of the world. Perhaps the positivist will now riposte that the object you see may well be complex but that our *experience* of it would or, rather, should be quite simple and elementary. So, according to the positivist, we mistakenly tend to project the complexity of these objects of experience on our experience of them. Although not being a phenomenologist à la Husserl, I must confess that I would not feel myself capable of making much of this objection. This distinction between “seeing complex things” on the one hand and the “complexity of seeing things” on the other seems to me to serve no other purpose than to save the skin of the positivist’s *Weltanschauung*—for this is what it is, in the end.

But even if this were to be granted to the positivist, I would like to ask about our experience of painting, of music, of art in general. Surely, such experiences are experiences in the most dramatic sense of the word, but we know that the experience of a work of art cannot be taken apart into a multitude of experiences of all its constituent components. When looking at a painting, you do not see, first, myriad tiny individual brushstrokes

that you, next, somehow put together again; you see the painting as a whole, in its totality, and experience it *as such*. There is an instructive anecdote about Clement Greenberg: When wishing to make up his mind about a painting, he walked up to the painting with his hands before his eyes. When standing right in front of the painting he dropped his hands and the immediate impact the painting *then* had on him would be decisive for him. Obviously, the procedure was intended to take in *the painting as a whole* and to avoid the temptation to somehow put it together out of its component parts. In sum, let us look with the greatest suspicion at philosophical accounts of experience ruling out a priori that experience could be something complex. More specifically, as long as we allow ourselves to be seduced by the positivist’s dogma of the nature of experience, we shall never be able to make any sense of historical experience. Theories of “sense data” are our worst guide if we wish to get a grasp of what goes on in history and in the humanities in general. As we shall see, historical experience is, just as it is in the arts, always most complex. In fact, in history it is just the other way around than is suggested by the positivist’s *Weltanschauung*. In history you move toward abstraction—and to doubtful intellectual construction—when moving away from complexity to what is allegedly basic and elementary. History comes to us in wholes, in totalities, and this is how we primarily experience both the past itself and what it has left us—as is the case in the arts and in aesthetic experience. The explanation is that history does not rise up before our minds from data found in the archives in the way that a detective may infer from the relevant data who committed a murder: It is, instead, a “displacement” of the present as dictated by these data, and, as such, it is experienced as a totality no less than is the case with the present. This, then, is what we always must bear in mind when thinking of the notion of experience and especially when considering what has been said on the notion by Huizinga—to whom I shall now turn.

3.3 HUIZINGA ON HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Historical experience has rarely attracted the attention of historians and has only rarely been discussed by historical theorists. What is, in my view, still the best account of historical experience can be found in Huizinga’s collected work, where the notion is discussed on two occasions, albeit tantalizingly briefly. Although the phenomenology of historical ex-

perience presented here by Huizinga is deplorably sketchy, I believe it to be fundamentally correct in the sense of projecting on it all the right associations with the right dosage. We might even conjecture it to have been a blessing in disguise that Huizinga never managed to write more than these meager two to three pages on historical experience. He is quite explicit about how important the notion is to him, and the brevity of his exposition may therefore have forced him to remain as close as possible to his intuitions and to what the notion truly meant to him. If Huizinga's fascination for the notion had tempted him to write some lengthy treatise on it, the clear contours of what we now find in his writings on historical experience might well have been lost. The passage in which Huizinga most fully summarizes his intuitions about historical experience runs as follows:

This brings us to the essence of the issue. There is in all historical awareness a most momentous component, that is most suitably characterized by the term historical sensation.⁸ One could also speak of historical contact. Historical imagination already says too much, and much the same is true of historical vision, insofar as the cognate notion of visual representation suggests a degree of determinacy that is still absent here. The German word "Ahnung" that had already been used by Wilhelm von Humboldt in this connection would almost express it if only the term had not lost its precise meaning by its use in another context. This contact with the past that cannot be reduced to anything outside itself is the entrance into a world of its own, it is one of the many variants of *ekstasis*, of an experience of truth that is given to the human being. It is not like the enjoyment of the work of art, nor a religious affect, nor a trembling before the confrontation with nature, nor the recognition of a metaphysical truth, but yet a member of this series. The object of this sensation are not individual human beings, nor human lives or human thoughts insofar as these possess discernible contours. It can hardly be called an image what the mind forms here or undergoes. Insofar as it takes on any distinct form at all, this form remains composite and vague: an "Ahnung," just as much of streets, houses and fields, of sounds and colors as it is of human beings structuring their lives and being structured by it. This contact with the past, that is accompanied by the absolute conviction of complete authenticity and truth, can be provoked by a line from a chronicle, by an engraving, a few sounds from an old song. It is not an element that the author writing in the past deliberately put down in his work. It is "behind" and not "in" the book that the past has left us. The contemporary reader takes it along with himself in his encounter with the author from the past; it is his response to his call. If this truly is an element of historical understanding, which many have referred to with the term "Nacherleben," then this term is completely mistaken. "Nacherleben" is too much suggestive of a psychological process.

Historical sensation does not present itself to us as a re-living, but as an understanding that is closely akin to the understanding of music, or, rather of the world by music.⁹ (my translation)

When trying to understand what Huizinga has in mind here, we had best begin by looking at what he considers to be the "typical" object of historical experience or sensation. As becomes clear from the quote, this object is nothing very specific: We should not relate it to the doings or the thoughts of individual human beings. Neither is it some deep structure that one might discern in it. The object of historical experience is given to us prior to conscious reflection by the historian; it is not to be related to any process of thought, to how the historian may combine the evidence the past has left us in order to devise the kind of hypotheses about the past that the constructivist we discussed a moment ago always had in mind. It is to be related, rather, to what happens between the historian and the past, to what happens on the interface between the two of them, and not where we will find ourselves when moving away from the interface, either toward the dark and hidden recesses of the past itself or toward the historian's cognitive machinery. Huizinga speaks here of *ekstasis*, hence of a movement by the historian with which he moves outside himself and reaches for the past, so to say. This is where Huizinga's historical experience comes close to Nietzsche's *Rausch*, a word without its exact equivalent in English, perhaps best described as a moment of enrapture and of being carried away by the intensity of experience. Its meaning and effects can best be elucidated by Nietzsche himself: "Die Raum- und Zeitbedingungen sind verändert; ungeheure Fernen werden überschaut und gleichsam erst wahrnehmbar; die Ausdehnung des Blicks über grössere Mengen und Weiten" ("The determinations of space and time have changed; immense distances are grasped within one single overview and become only now perceivable; it offers an expansion of view comprising many things both close and remote" [my translation]).¹⁰ All spatial and temporal demarcations have momentarily been lifted; it is as if the temporal trajectory between past and present, instead of separating the two, has become the locus of their encounter. Historical experience pulls the faces of past and present together in a short but ecstatic kiss. Historical experience is, in this way, a "surface" phenomenon: It takes place on the surface or interface where the historian and the past meet each other. But this certainly does not imply that we have now entered the domain of mysticism and irrationality.

under control":

That revolution will come precisely because of the infiltration of clear and articulate language into the marginal areas of human sexual exploration, such as this book from time to time describes, and of which it is only the most modest example. Now that a significant range of people have begun to get a clearer idea of what has been possible among the varieties of human pleasure in the recent past, heterosexuals and homosexuals, females and males will insist on exploring them even further. [*M*, p. 175]

By writing about the bathhouse Delany seeks not, he says, "to romanticize that time into some cornucopia of sexual plenty," but rather to break an "absolutely sanctioned public silence" on questions of sexual practice, to reveal something that existed but that had been suppressed.

Only the coyest and the most indirect articulations could occasionally indicate the boundaries of a phenomenon whose centers could not be spoken or written of, even figuratively: and that coyness was medical and legal as well as literary; and, as Foucault has told us, it was, in its coyness, a huge and pervasive discourse. But what that coyness means is that there is no way to gain from it a clear, accurate, and extensive picture of extant public sexual institutions. That discourse only touched on highly select margins when they transgressed the legal and/or medical standards of a populace that firmly wished to maintain that no such institutions existed. [*M*, pp. 175-76]

The point of Delany's description, indeed of his entire book, is to document the existence of those institutions in all their variety and multiplicity, to write about and thus to render historical what has hitherto been hidden from history.

As I read it, a metaphor of visibility as literal transparency is crucial to his project. The blue lights illuminate a scene he has participated in before (in darkened trucks parked along the docks under the West Side Highway, in men's rooms in subway stations), but understood only in a fragmented way. "No one ever got *to see* its whole" (*M*, p. 174; emphasis added). He attributes the impact of the bathhouse scene to its visibility: "You could *see* what was going on throughout the dorm" (*M*, p. 173; emphasis added). Seeing enables him to comprehend the relationship between his personal activities and politics: "the first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies." Recounting that moment also allows him to explain the aim of his book: to provide a "clear, accurate, and extensive *picture* of extant public sexual institutions" so that others may learn about and explore them (*M*, pp. 174, 176; emphasis added). Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization, the visible is privileged;

writing is then put at its service.³ Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.

This kind of communication has long been the mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past. It has produced a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others and has drawn attention to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional histories. It has also occasioned a crisis for orthodox history by multiplying not only stories but subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed irreconcilable—perspectives or standpoints, none of which is complete or completely “true.” Like Delany’s memoir, these histories have provided evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds, whether these constructions vaunt the political superiority of white men, the coherence and unity of selves, the naturalness of heterosexual monogamy, or the inevitability of scientific progress and economic development. The challenge to normative history has been described, in terms of conventional historical understandings of evidence, as an enlargement of the picture, a correction to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision, and it has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as of the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her texts.

Documenting the experience of others in this way has been at once a highly successful and limiting strategy for historians of difference. It has been successful because it remains so comfortably within the disciplinary framework of history, working according to rules that permit calling old narratives into question when new evidence is discovered. The status of evidence is, of course, ambiguous for historians. On the one hand, they acknowledge that “evidence only counts as evidence and is only recognized as such in relation to a potential narrative, so that the narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative.”⁴ On the other hand, historians’ rhetorical treatment of evidence and their use of it to falsify prevailing interpretations, depends on a referential notion of evidence which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real.⁵ Michel de Certeau’s description is apt. Historical

3. On the distinction between seeing and writing in formulations of identity, see Homi K. Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity,” in *Identity: The Real Me*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London, 1987), pp. 5–11.

4. Lionel Gossman, *Towards a Rational Historiography*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s. 79, pt. 3 (Philadelphia, 1989), p. 26.

5. On the “documentary” or “objectivist” model used by historians, see Dominick LaCapra, “Rhetoric and History,” *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 15–44.

discourse, he writes,

gives itself credibility in the name of the reality which it is supposed to represent, but this authorized appearance of the "real" serves precisely to camouflage the practice which in fact determines it. Representation thus disguises the praxis that organizes it.⁶

When the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience," the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation on which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it. When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.⁷

6. Michel de Certeau, "History: Science and Fiction," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 203; hereafter abbreviated "H."

7. Vision, as Donna Haraway points out, is not passive reflection. "All eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing—that is, ways of life" (Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14 [Fall 1988]: 583). In another essay she pushes the optical metaphor further: "The rays from my optical device diffract rather than reflect. These diffracting rays compose *interference* patterns, not reflecting images. . . . A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather where the *effects* of differences appear" (Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: Reproductive Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," typescript). In this connection, see also Minnie Bruce Pratt's discussion of her eye that "has only let in what I have been taught to see," in her "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," in Elly Bulkin, Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1984), and the analysis of Pratt's autobiographical essay by Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), pp. 191–212.

uses of **existential**, with the implicit reference to a form of **existentialism**. But phrases like **existential awareness**, and the use of **existential** with a wide variety of nouns of feeling and of action, have become extended beyond any deliberate position. In their sense of process, actuality, or immediacy they can be seen as connected with earlier pre-existentialist senses, and indeed with the main history of the word. It is primarily in relation to senses of choice, anxiety and unpredictability that the philosophical tendency, however loosely in many cases, has given the contemporary word a special meaning. But this is not always distinguishable (and in some cases the lack of distinction is confusing) from simple descriptive uses for *living* or *actuality*. Thus 'the existential character of life in the modern city' may mean (i) the immediately observed day-to-day life of the inhabitants of a modern city, with no prior assumption of its necessary (**essential**) characteristics; or (ii) the strange, meaningless, alienated life of the inhabitants of the city, full of immediate occasions for unforeseen choices and full also of threat and anxiety; or (iii) the absurd condition of the modern city as a social form, with its inherent (? **essential**) conditions of strangeness and lack of purpose and connections. It is probably as well, whenever this now powerful word is used, to look for some early existential specification.

See DETERMINE, IDEALISM, INDIVIDUAL

EXPERIENCE

The old association between **experience** and *experiment* can seem, in some of the most important modern uses, merely obsolete. (The relations between the two words, until 1C18, are described under EMPIRICAL.) The problem now is to consider the relations between two main senses which have been important since 1C18. These can be summarized as (i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge'. We can give a famous and influential example of each sense.

Burke, in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), wrote:

If I might venture to appeal to what is so much out of fashion in Paris,
I mean to experience . . .

This is a conservative argument against 'rash' political innovation, stressing the need for 'slow but well-sustained progress', taking each step as it comes and watching its effect. We can see how this developed from the sense of experiment and observation, but what is new is the confident generalization of the 'lessons of experience': particular conclusions as well as particular methods. Someone in Paris might have replied that the Revolution itself was an 'experience', in the sense of putting a new kind of politics to trial and observation, but for all those older implications of the word it seems certain that this would have been overborne, at least in English, by the riper and more gathered sense, then and now, of 'lessons' as against 'innovations' or 'experiments'.

That is **experience** past. We can see **experience** present in T. S. Eliot (*Metaphysical Poets*, 1921):

a thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility.

What is implicit here is a distinction between kinds of consciousness; to some people, it seems, a thought would *not* be an experience, but a (lesser) act of reasoning or opinion. **Experience**, in this major tendency, is then the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness, and it includes feeling as well as thought. This sense has been very active in *aesthetic* discussion, following an earlier religious sense, and it can come to be contrasted, over a wide area, with the kinds of consciousness involved in reasoning and conscious experiment.

It is evident that the grounds for reliance on **experience** past ('lessons') and **experience** present (full and active 'awareness') are radically different, yet there is nevertheless a link between them, in some of the kinds of action and consciousness which they both oppose. This does not have to be the case, but the two distinct senses, from 1C18, have in practice moved together, within a common historical situation.

It is very difficult, in the complexity of the emergence of these senses from the always latent significances in much earlier uses, to mark definite phases. The general usefulness of **experience** past is so widely recognized that it is difficult to know who would want to challenge it while it remains a neutral sense, permitting radically different conclusions to be drawn from diversely gathered and interpreted observations. But it is of course just this which the rhetorical use against *experiment* or *innovation* prevents. It is interesting that Blake, at almost the same time as Burke, used **experience** in a much more problematic way: less bland, less confident; indeed a troubled contrast with *innocence*. So far from being an

available and positive set of recommendations, it was 'bought with the price of all that a man hath' (*Four Zoas*, II, c. 1800). No specific interpretation of **experience** can in practice be assumed to be directive; it is quite possible from **experience** to see a need for *experiment* or *innovation*.

This might be easier to agree than the problem of **experience** present. It is clear that this involves an appeal to the whole consciousness, the whole being, as against reliance on more specialized or more limited states or faculties. As such it is part of that general movement which underlies the development of **CULTURE** (q.v.) and its directly associated terms. The strength of this appeal to wholeness, against forms of thought which would exclude certain kinds of consciousness as merely 'personal', 'subjective' or 'emotional', is evident. Yet within the form of appeal (as again in **CULTURE** and **ART**) the stress on wholeness can become a form of exclusion of other nominated partialities. The recent history of this shift is in aesthetics (understandably so, when we recall the development of **AESTHETICS** itself), but the decisive phase was probably in a certain form of religion, and especially Methodism.

The sense develops from **experience** as 'being consciously the subject of a state or condition' (OED, 4) and especially from the application of this to an 'inner', 'personal', religious experience. While this was available within many religious forms, it became especially important within Protestantism, and was increasingly relied on in later and more radical Protestant movements. Thus in Methodism there were *experience-meetings*, classes 'held for the recital of religious experiences'. A description of 1857 records that 'there was praying, and exhorting, and telling experiences, and singing . . . sentimental hymns'. This is then a notion of **SUBJECTIVE** (q.v.) witness, offered to be shared. What is important about it, for a later more general sense, is that such **experiences** are offered not only as truths, but as the most authentic kind of truths. Within theology, this claim has been the matter of an immense argument. The caution of Jonathan Edwards – 'those experiences which are agreeable to the word of God are right' (1758) – is among the more moderate reactions. It is clear that in C20 both the claim and the doubts and objections have moved into a much wider field. At one extreme **experience** (present) is offered as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis. At the other extreme, **experience** (once the present participle not of 'feeling' but of 'trying' or 'testing' something) is seen as the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception, and thus not as material for truths but as evidence of conditions or systems which by definition it cannot itself explain.

This remains a fundamental controversy, and it is not, fortunately, limited to its extreme positions. But much of the controversy is confused, from the beginning,

by the complex and often alternative senses of **experience** itself. **Experience** past already includes, at its most serious, those processes of consideration, reflection and analysis which the most extreme use of **experience** present – an unquestionable authenticity and immediacy – excludes. Similarly, the reduction of **experience** to material always produced from elsewhere depends on an exclusion of kinds of consideration, reflection and analysis which are not of a consciously separated systematic type. It is then not that such kinds should not be tested, but that in the deepest sense of **experience** all kinds of evidence and its consideration should be tried.

See EMPIRICAL, RATIONAL, SENSIBILITY, SUBJECTIVE

EXPERT

Expert is from fw *expert*, oF, rw *expertus*, L, past participle of *experiri* – to try. It appeared in English, as an adjective, in IC14, at the same time as the closely related **experience**. It is characteristic that it began to be used as a noun – *an expert* – from eC19, in an industrial society which put increasing emphasis on specialization and qualification. It has continued to be used over a wide range of activities, at times with a certain vagueness (cf. *qualified* and the more deliberate *formal qualifications*). It is interesting that *inexpert*, as a noun in the opposite sense, was occasionally used from IC19, but the main word in this sense is, of course, *layman*, generalized from the old contrast between *laymen* and *clerics*. *Lay* is from fw *laicus*, L – not of the clergy, from rw *laikos*, Gk – of the people. There is a comparable movement in *profession*, C13, from rw *profiteri*, L – to declare aloud, which was originally an avowal of religious belief, becoming the basis of two nouns; *professor* – a ranked teacher, C14, an avower, C15; and *professional*, C18, in a widening range of vocations and occupations. *Amateur*, fw *amatore*, It, rw *amator*, L – lover, and thence one who loves something, developed in an opposed pairing with *professional* (first as a matter of relative skill, later as a class and then monetary distinction) from C18.

See INTELLECTUAL

EXPLOITATION

Exploitation came into English in eC19, in what is almost certainly a direct borrowing from French. The rw is *explico*, L, in its range of senses from unfold and spread out to arrange and explain (this last leading to *explication*, as the earlier senses had led to *explicit*). In oF the form was *explectation*, and there was a feudal