Humanities 583
Weeks 2 and 3 Readings
September 9 and 16, 2025

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Experience

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1 The lords of life, the lords of life,—
I saw them pass,
In their own guise,
Like and unlike,
Portly and grim,
Use and Surprise,
Surface and Dream,
Succession swift, and spectral Wrong,
Temperament without a tongue,
And the inventor of the game
Omnipresent without name;—
Some to see, some to be guessed,
They marched from east to west:
Little man, least of all,
Among the legs of his guardians tall,
Walked about with puzzled look:—
Him by the hand dear nature took;
Dearest nature, strong and kind,
Whispered, 'Darling, never mind!
Tomorrow they will wear another face,
The founder thou! these are thy race!'[1]

2 Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday.[2] Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of

the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. Did our birth fall in some fit of indigence and frugality in nature, that she was so sparing of her fire and so liberal of her earth, that it appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no superfluity of spirit for new creation? We have enough to live and bring the year about, but not an ounce to impart or to invest. Ah that our Genius were a little more of a genius! We are like millers on the lower levels of a stream, when the factories above them have exhausted the water. We too fancy that the upper people must have raised their dams.

If any of us knew what we were doing, or where we are going, then when 3
we think we best know! We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered, that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us. All our days are so unprofitable while they pass, that 'tis wonderful where or when we ever got anything of this which we call wisdom, poetry, virtue. We never got it on any dated calendar day. Some heavenly days must have been intercalated somewhere, like those that Hermes won with dice of the Moon, that Osiris might be born.[3] It is said, all martyrdoms looked mean when they were suffered.[4] Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail in. Embark, and the romance quits our vessel, and hangs on every other sail in the horizon. Our life looks trivial, and we shun to record it. Men seem to have learned of the horizon the art of perpetual retreating and reference. 'Yonder uplands are rich pasturage, and my neighbor has fertile meadow, but my field,' says the querulous farmer, 'only holds the world together.'[5] I quote another man's saying; unluckily, that other withdraws himself in the same way, and quotes me. 'Tis the trick of nature thus to degrade today; a good deal of buzz, and somewhere a result slipped magically in. Every roof is agreeable to the eye, until it is lifted; then we find tragedy and moaning women, and hard-eyed husbands, and deluges of lethe, and the men ask, 'What's the news?' as if the old were so bad. How many individuals can we count in society? how many actions? how many opinions? So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each man's genius contracts itself to a very few hours. The history of literature—take the net result of Tiraboschi, Warton, or Schlegel,—is a sum of very few ideas, and of very few original tales,—all the rest being variation of these.[6] So in this great society wide lying

around us, a critical analysis would find very few spontaneous actions. It is almost all custom and gross sense. There are even few opinions, and these seem organic in the speakers, and do not disturb the universal necessity.

4 What opium is instilled into all disaster! It shows formidable as we approach it, but there is at last no rough rasping friction, but the most slippery sliding surfaces. We fall soft on a thought. *Ate Dea* is gentle,

> "Over men's heads walking aloft,
> With tender feet treading so soft."[7]

People give and bemoan themselves, but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers.[8] Was it Boscovich who found out that bodies never come in contact? Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. Grief too will make us idealists. In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me.[9] If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. The Indian who was laid under a curse, that the wind should not blow on him, nor water flow to him, nor fire burn him, is a type of us all.[10] The dearest events are summer-rain, and we the Para coats that shed every drop.[11] Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us.

5 I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. We may have the sphere for our

cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosophy. Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual.

6 Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. From the mountain you see the mountain. We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man, whether he shall see the sunset or the fine poem. There are always sunsets, and there is always genius; but only a few hours so serene that we can relish nature or criticism. The more or less depends on structure or temperament. Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung. Of what use is fortune or talent to a cold and defective nature? Who cares what sensibility or discrimination a man has at some time shown, if he falls asleep in his chair? or if he laugh and giggle? or if he apologize? or is affected with egotism? or thinks of his dollar? or cannot go by food? or has gotten a child in his boyhood? Of what use is genius, if the organ is too convex or too concave, and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life? Of what use, if the brain is too cold or too hot, and the man does not care enough for results, to stimulate him to experiment, and hold him up in it? or if the web is too finely woven, too irritable by pleasure and pain, so that life stagnates from too much reception, without due outlet? Of what use to make heroic vows of amendment, if the same old law-breaker is to keep them? What cheer can the religious sentiment yield, when that is suspected to be secretly dependent on the seasons of the year, and the state of the blood? I knew a witty physician who found theology in the biliary duct, and used to affirm that if there was disease in the liver, the man became a Calvinist, and if that organ was sound, he became a Unitarian.[12] Very mortifying is the reluctant experience that some unfriendly excess or imbecility neutralizes the promise of genius. We see young men who owe us a new world, so readily and lavishly they promise, but they never acquit the debt;[13] they die young and dodge the account: or if they live, they lose themselves in the crowd.

7 Temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions, and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see. There is an optical illusion about every person we meet. In truth, they are all creatures of given temperament,

which will appear in a given character, whose boundaries they will never pass: but we look at them, they seem alive, and we presume there is impulse in them. In the moment it seems impulse; in the year, in the lifetime, it turns out to be a certain uniform tune which the revolving barrel of the music-box must play. Men resist the conclusion in the morning, but adopt it as the evening wears on, that temper prevails over everything of time, place, and condition, and is inconsumable in the flames of religion. Some modifications the moral sentiment avails to impose, but the individual texture holds its dominion, if not to bias the moral judgments, yet to fix the measure of activity and of enjoyment.

8 I thus express the law as it is read from the platform of ordinary life, but must not leave it without noticing the capital exception. For temperament is a power which no man willingly hears any one praise but himself. On the platform of physics, we cannot resist the contracting influences of so-called science. Temperament puts all divinity to rout. I know the mental proclivity of physicians. I hear the chuckle of the phrenologists. Theoretic kidnappers and slave-drivers, they esteem each man the victim of another, who winds him round his finger by knowing the law of his being, and by such cheap signboards as the color of his beard, or the slope of his occiput, reads the inventory of his fortunes and character.[14] The grossest ignorance does not disgust like this impudent knowingness. The physicians say, they are not materialists; but they are:—Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness: O *so* thin!—But the definition of *spiritual* should be, *that which is its own evidence.*[15] What notions do they attach to love! what to religion! One would not willingly pronounce these words in their hearing, and give them the occasion to profane them. I saw a gracious gentleman who adapts his conversation to the form of the head of the man he talks with![16] I had fancied that the value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me. I carry the keys of my castle in my hand, ready to throw them at the feet of my lord, whenever and in what disguise soever he shall appear. I know he is in the neighborhood hidden among vagabonds. Shall I preclude my future, by taking a high seat, and kindly adapting my conversation to the shape of heads? When I come to that, the doctors shall buy me for a cent.—'But, sir, medical history; the report to the Institute; the proven facts!'—I distrust the facts and the inferences. Temperament is the veto or limitation-power in the constitution, very justly ap-

plied to restrain an opposite excess in the constitution, but absurdly offered as a bar to original equity. When virtue is in presence, all subordinate powers sleep. On its own level, or in view of nature, temperament is final. I see not, if one be once caught in this trap of so-called sciences, any escape for the man from the links of the chain of physical necessity. Given such an embryo, such a history must follow. On this platform, one lives in a sty of sensualism, and would soon come to suicide. But it is impossible that the creative power should exclude itself. Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes. The intellect, seeker of absolute truth, or the heart, lover of absolute good, intervenes for our succor, and at one whisper of these high powers, we awake from ineffectual struggles with this nightmare. We hurl it into its own hell, and cannot again contract ourselves to so base a state.

The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove.*[17] When, at night, I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious. We house with the insane, and must humor them; then conversation dies out. Once I took such delight in Montaigne, that I thought I should not need any other book;[18] before that, in Shakspeare; then in Plutarch; then in Plotinus; at one time in Bacon; afterwards in Goethe; even in Bettine;[19] but now I turn the pages of either of them languidly, whilst I still cherish their genius. So with pictures; each will bear an emphasis of attention once, which it cannot retain, though we fain would continue to be pleased in that manner. How strongly I have felt of pictures, that when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again. I have had good lessons from pictures, which I have since seen without emotion or remark. A deduction must be made from the opinion, which even the wise express of a new book or occurrence. Their opinion gives me tidings of their mood, and some vague guess at the new fact, but is nowise to be trusted as the lasting relation between that intellect and that thing. The child asks, 'Mamma, why don't I like the story as well as when you told it me yesterday?' Alas, child, it is even so with the oldest cheru-

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bim of knowledge.[20] But will it answer thy question to say, Because thou wert born to a whole, and this story is a particular? The reason of the pain this discovery causes us (and we make it late in respect to works of art and intellect), is the plaint of tragedy which murmurs from it in regard to persons, to friendship and love.

10 That immobility and absence of elasticity which we find in the arts, we find with more pain in the artist. There is no power of expansion in men. Our friends early appear to us as representatives of certain ideas, which they never pass or exceed. They stand on the brink of the ocean of thought and power, but they never take the single step that would bring them there. A man is like a bit of Labrador spar, which has no lustre as you turn it in your hand, until you come to a particular angle;[21] then it shows deep and beautiful colors. There is no adaptation or universal applicability in men, but each has his special talent, and the mastery of successful men consists in adroitly keeping themselves where and when that turn shall be oftenest to be practised. We do what we must, and call it by the best names we can, and would fain have the praise of having intended the result which ensues. I cannot recall any form of man who is not superfluous sometimes. But is not this pitiful? Life is not worth the taking, to do tricks in.

11 Of course, it needs the whole society, to give the symmetry we seek. The parti-colored wheel must revolve very fast to appear white. Something is learned too by conversing with so much folly and defect. In fine, whoever loses, we are always of the gaining party. Divinity is behind our failures and follies also. The plays of children are nonsense, but very educative nonsense. So it is with the largest and solemnest things, with commerce, government, church, marriage, and so with the history of every man's bread, and the ways by which he is to come by it. Like a bird which alights nowhere, but hops perpetually from bough to bough, is the Power which abides in no man and in no woman, but for a moment speaks from this one, and for another moment from that one.

12 But what help from these fineries or pedantries? What help from thought? Life is not dialectics. We, I think, in these times, have had lessons enough of the futility of criticism. Our young people have thought and written much on labor and reform, and for all that they have written, neither the world nor themselves have got on a step. Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede

muscular activity. If a man should consider the nicety of the passage of a piece of bread down his throat, he would starve. At Education-Farm, the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy. It would not rake or pitch a ton of hay; it would not rub down a horse; and the men and maidens it left pale and hungry.[22] A political orator wittily compared our party promises to western roads, which opened stately enough, with planted trees on either side, to tempt the traveller, but soon became narrow and narrower, and ended in a squirrel-track, and ran up a tree. So does culture with us; it ends in headache. Unspeakably sad and barren does life look to those, who a few months ago were dazzled with the splendor of the promise of the times. "There is now no longer any right course of action, nor any self-devotion left among the Iranis."[23] Objections and criticism we have had our fill of. There are objections to every course of life and action, and the practical wisdom infers an indifferency, from the omnipresence of objection. The whole frame of things preaches indifferency. Do not craze yourself with thinking, 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." To fill the hour,—that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval. We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. Under the oldest mouldiest conventions, a man of native force prospers just as well as in the newest world, and that by skill of handling and treatment. He can take hold anywhere. Life itself is a mixture of power and form, and will not bear the least excess of either. To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom. It is not the part of men, but of fanatics, or of mathematicians, if you will, to say, that, the shortness of life considered, it is not worth caring whether for so short a duration we were sprawling in want, or sitting high. Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. Five minutes of today are worth as much to me, as five minutes in the next millennium. Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, today. Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are. Men live in their fancy, like drunkards whose hands are too soft and tremulous for successful labor. It is a tempest of fancies, and the only ballast I know, is a respect to the present

hour. Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us. If these are mean and malignant, their contentment, which is the last victory of justice, is a more satisfying echo to the heart, than the voice of poets and the casual sympathy of admirable persons. I think that however a thoughtful man may suffer from the defects and absurdities of his company, he cannot without affectation deny to any set of men and women, a sensibility to extraordinary merit. The coarse and frivolous have an instinct of superiority, if they have not a sympathy, and honor it in their blind capricious way with sincere homage.

13 The fine young people despise life, but in me, and in such as with me are free from dyspepsia, and to whom a day is a sound and solid good, it is a great excess of politeness to look scornful and to cry for company. I am grown by sympathy a little eager and sentimental, but leave me alone, and I should relish every hour and what it brought me, the potluck of the day, as heartily as the oldest gossip in the bar-room.[24] I am thankful for small mercies. I compared notes with one of my friends who expects everything of the universe, and is disappointed when anything is less than the best, and I found that I begin at the other extreme, expecting nothing, and am always full of thanks for moderate goods. I accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies. I find my account in sots and bores also. They give a reality to the circumjacent picture, which such a vanishing meteorous appearance can ill spare. In the morning I awake, and find the old world, wife, babes, and mother, Concord and Boston, the dear old spiritual world, and even the dear old devil not far off. 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. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry,—a narrow belt. Moreover, in popular experience, everything good is on the highway. A collector peeps into all the pictureshops of Europe, for a landscape of Poussin, a crayon-sketch of Salvator; but the Transfiguration, the Last Judgment, the Communion of St. Jerome, and

what are as transcendent as these, are on the walls of the Vatican, the Uffizi, or the Louvre, where every footman may see them;[25] to say nothing of nature's pictures in every street, of sunsets and sunrises every day, and the sculpture of the human body never absent. A collector recently bought at public auction, in London, for one hundred and fifty-seven guineas, an autograph of Shakspeare: but for nothing a school-boy can read Hamlet, and can detect secrets of highest concernment yet unpublished therein. I think I will never read any but the commonest books,—the Bible, Homer, Dante, Shakspeare, and Milton. Then we are impatient of so public a life and planet, and run hither and thither for nooks and secrets. The imagination delights in the wood-craft of Indians, trappers, and bee-hunters. We fancy that we are strangers, and not so intimately domesticated in the planet as the wild man, and the wild beast and bird. But the exclusion reaches them also; reaches the climbing, flying, gliding, feathered and four-footed man. Fox and woodchuck, hawk and snipe, and bittern, when nearly seen, have no more root in the deep world than man, and are just such superficial tenants of the globe. Then the new molecular philosophy shows astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom, shows that the world is all outside: it has no inside.

The mid-world is best. Nature, as we know her, is no saint. The lights of 14
the church, the ascetics, Gentoos and Grahamites, she does not distinguish by any favor.[26] She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of our law, do not come out of the Sunday School, nor weigh their food, nor punctually keep the commandments. If we will be strong with her strength, we must not harbor such disconsolate consciences, borrowed too from the consciences of other nations. We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come. So many things are unsettled which it is of the first importance to settle,—and, pending their settlement, we will do as we do. Whilst the debate goes forward on the equity of commerce, and will not be closed for a century or two, New and Old England may keep shop. Law of copyright and international copyright is to be discussed, and, in the interim, we will sell our books for the most we can.[27] Expediency of literature, reason of literature, lawfulness of writing down a thought, is questioned; much is to say on both sides, and, while the fight waxes hot, thou, dearest scholar, stick to thy foolish task, add a line every hour, and between whiles add a line. Right to hold land, right of property, is disputed, and the conventions convene, and

before the vote is taken, dig away in your garden, and spend your earnings as a waif or godsend to all serene and beautiful purposes. Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep.[28] Grant it, and as much more as they will,—but thou, God's darling! heed thy private dream: thou wilt not be missed in the scorning and skepticism: there are enough of them: stay there in thy closet, and toil, until the rest are agreed what to do about it. Thy sickness, they say, and thy puny habit, require that thou do this or avoid that, but know that thy life is a flitting state, a tent for a night, and do thou, sick or well, finish that stint. Thou art sick, but shalt not be worse, and the universe, which holds thee dear, shall be the better.

15 Human life is made up of the two elements, power and form, and the proportion must be invariably kept, if we would have it sweet and sound. Each of these elements in excess makes a mischief as hurtful as its defect. Everything runs to excess: every good quality is noxious, if unmixed, and, to carry the danger to the edge of ruin, nature causes each man's peculiarity to superabound. Here, among the farms, we adduce the scholars as examples of this treachery. They are nature's victims of expression. You who see the artist, the orator, the poet, too near, and find their life no more excellent than that of mechanics or farmers, and themselves victims of partiality, very hollow and haggard, and pronounce them failures,—not heroes, but quacks,—conclude very reasonably, that these arts are not for man, but are disease. Yet nature will not bear you out. Irresistible nature made men such, and makes legions more of such, every day. You love the boy reading in a book, gazing at a drawing, or a cast: yet what are these millions who read and behold, but incipient writers and sculptors? Add a little more of that quality which now reads and sees, and they will seize the pen and chisel. And if one remembers how innocently he began to be an artist, he perceives that nature joined with his enemy. A man is a golden impossibility. The line he must walk is a hair's breadth. The wise through excess of wisdom is made a fool.

16 How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these beautiful limits, and adjust ourselves, once for all, to the perfect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect. In the street and in the newspapers, life appears so plain a business, that manly resolution and adherence to the multiplication-table through all weathers, will insure success. But ah! presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering,—which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years! Tomorrow again, every-

thing looks real and angular, the habitual standards are reinstated, common sense is as rare as genius,—is the basis of genius, and experience is hands and feet to every enterprise;—and yet, he who should do his business on this understanding, would be quickly bankrupt. Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life. It is ridiculous that we are diplomatists, and doctors, and considerate people: there are no dupes like these. Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not. God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future. We would look about us, but with grand politeness he draws down before us an impenetrable screen of purest sky, and another behind us of purest sky. 'You will not remember,' he seems to say, 'and you will not expect.' All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual. The most attractive class of people are those who are powerful obliquely, and not by the direct stroke: men of genius, but not yet accredited: one gets the cheer of their light, without paying too great a tax. Theirs is the beauty of the bird, or the morning light, and not of art. In the thought of genius there is always a surprise; and the moral sentiment is well called "the newness," for it is never other;[29] as new to the oldest intelligence as to the young child,—"the kingdom that cometh without observation."[30] In like manner, for practical success, there must not be too much design. A man will not be observed in doing that which he can do best. There is a certain magic about his properest action, which stupefies your powers of observation, so that though it is done before you, you wist not of it. The art of life has a pudency, and will not be exposed. Every man is an impossibility, until he is born; every thing impossible, until we see a success. The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism,—that nothing is of us or our works,—that all is of God. Nature will not spare us the smallest leaf of laurel. All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing and having. I would gladly be moral, and keep due metes and bounds, which I dearly love, and allow the most to the will of man, but I have set my heart on honesty in this chapter, and I can see nothing at last, in success or failure,

than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal. The results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable. The years teach much which the days never know. The persons who compose our company, converse, and come and go, and design and execute many things, and somewhat comes of it all, but an unlooked for result. The individual is always mistaken. He designed many things, and drew in other persons as coadjutors, quarrelled with some or all, blundered much, and something is done; all are a little advanced, but the individual is always mistaken. It turns out somewhat new, and very unlike what he promised himself.

17 The ancients, struck with this irreducibleness of the elements of human life to calculation, exalted Chance into a divinity, but that is to stay too long at the spark,—which glitters truly at one point,—but the universe is warm with the latency of the same fire. The miracle of life which will not be expounded, but will remain a miracle, introduces a new element. In the growth of the embryo, Sir Everard Home, I think, noticed that the evolution was not from one central point, but coactive from three or more points.[31] Life has no memory. That which proceeds in succession might be remembered, but that which is coexistent, or ejaculated from a deeper cause, as yet far from being conscious, knows not its own tendency. So is it with us, now skeptical, or without unity, because immersed in forms and effects all seeming to be of equal yet hostile value, and now religious, whilst in the reception of spiritual law. Bear with these distractions, with this coetaneous growth of the parts: they will one day be *members,* and obey one will. On that one will, on that secret cause, they nail our attention and hope. Life is hereby melted into an expectation or a religion. Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars, is a musical perfection, the Ideal journeying always with us, the heaven without rent or seam. Do but observe the mode of our illumination. When I converse with a profound mind, or if at any time being alone I have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water, or go to the fire, being cold: no! but I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals, and showed the approaching traveller the inland mountains, with the tranquil eternal meadows spread at their base, whereon flocks graze, and

shepherds pipe and dance. But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel. I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement, before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West.

> "Since neither now nor yesterday began
> These thoughts, which have been ever, nor yet can
> A man be found who their first entrance knew."[32]

If I have described life as a flux of moods, I must now add, that there is that in us which changes not, and which ranks all sensations and states of mind. The consciousness in each man is a sliding scale, which identifies him now with the First Cause, and now with the flesh of his body; life above life, in infinite degrees. The sentiment from which it sprung determines the dignity of any deed, and the question ever is, not, what you have done or forborne, but, at whose command you have done or forborne it.

Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost,—these are quaint names, too nar- 18
row to cover this unbounded substance.[33] The baffled intellect must still kneel before this cause, which refuses to be named,—ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol, as, Thales by water, Anaximenes by air, Anaxagoras by (Νους) thought, Zoroaster by fire, Jesus and the moderns by love: and the metaphor of each has become a national religion.[34] The Chinese Mencius has not been the least successful in his generalization. "I fully understand language," he said, "and nourish well my vast-flowing vigor."—"I beg to ask what you call vast-flowing vigor?"—said his companion. "The explanation," replied Mencius, "is difficult. This vigor is supremely great, and in the highest degree unbending. Nourish it correctly, and do it no injury, and it will fill up the vacancy between heaven and earth. This vigor accords with and assists justice and reason, and leaves no hunger."[35]—In our more correct writing, we give to this generalization the name of Being, and thereby confess that we have arrived as far as we can go. Suffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at intermi-

nable oceans. Our life seems not present, so much as prospective; not for the affairs on which it is wasted, but as a hint of this vast-flowing vigor. Most of life seems to be mere advertisement of faculty: information is given us not to sell ourselves cheap; that we are very great. So, in particulars, our greatness is always in a tendency or direction, not in an action. It is for us to believe in the rule, not in the exception. The noble are thus known from the ignoble. So in accepting the leading of the sentiments, it is not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul, or the like, but *the universal impulse to believe,* that is the material circumstance, and is the principal fact in the history of the globe. Shall we describe this cause as that which works directly? The spirit is not helpless or needful of mediate organs. It has plentiful powers and direct effects. I am explained without explaining, I am felt without acting, and where I am not. Therefore all just persons are satisfied with their own praise. They refuse to explain themselves, and are content that new actions should do them that office. They believe that we communicate without speech, and above speech, and that no right action of ours is quite unaffecting to our friends, at whatever distance; for the influence of action is not to be measured by miles. Why should I fret myself, because a circumstance has occurred, which hinders my presence where I was expected? If I am not at the meeting, my presence where I am, should be as useful to the commonwealth of friendship and wisdom, as would be my presence in that place. I exert the same quality of power in all places. Thus journeys the mighty Ideal before us; it never was known to fall into the rear. No man ever came to an experience which was satiating, but his good is tidings of a better. Onward and onward! In liberated moments, we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible; the elements already exist in many minds around you, of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have. The new statement will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed. For, skepticisms are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in, and make affirmations outside of them, just as much as it must include the oldest beliefs.

19 It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but

mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions,—objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas. Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast. The street is full of humiliations to the proud. As the fop contrived to dress his bailiffs in his livery, and make them wait on his guests at table,[36] so the chagrins which the bad heart gives off as bubbles, at once take form as ladies and gentlemen in the street, shopmen or bar-keepers in hotels, and threaten or insult whatever is threatenable and insultable in us. 'Tis the same with our idolatries. People forget that it is the eye which makes the horizon, and the rounding mind's eye which makes this or that man a type or representative of humanity with the name of hero or saint. Jesus the "providential man," is a good man on whom many people are agreed that these optical laws shall take effect. By love on one part, and by forbearance to press objection on the other part, it is for a time settled, that we will look at him in the centre of the horizon, and ascribe to him the properties that will attach to any man so seen. But the longest love or aversion has a speedy term. The great and crescive self, rooted in absolute nature, supplants all relative existence, and ruins the kingdom of mortal friendship and love.[37] Marriage (in what is called the spiritual world) is impossible, because of the inequality between every subject and every object. The subject is the receiver of Godhead, and at every comparison must feel his being enhanced by that cryptic might. Though not in energy, yet by presence, this magazine of substance cannot be otherwise than felt: nor can any force of intellect attribute to the object the proper deity which sleeps or wakes forever in every subject. Never can love make consciousness and ascription equal in force. There will be the same gulf between every me and thee, as between the original and the picture. The universe is the bride of the soul. All private sympathy is partial. Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point, and, whilst they remain in contact, all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts, the more energy of appetency the parts not in union acquire.[38]

Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided nor doubled. Any invasion of 20

its unity would be chaos. The soul is not twin-born, but the only begotten, and though revealing itself as child in time, child in appearance, is of a fatal and universal power, admitting no co-life. Every day, every act betrays the ill-concealed deity. We believe in ourselves, as we do not believe in others. We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others, is experiment for us. It is an instance of our faith in ourselves, that men never speak of crime as lightly as they think: or, every man thinks a latitude safe for himself, which is nowise to be indulged to another. The act looks very differently on the inside, and on the outside; in its quality, and in its consequences. Murder in the murderer is no such ruinous thought as poets and romancers will have it; it does not unsettle him, or fright him from his ordinary notice of trifles: it is an act quite easy to be contemplated, but in its sequel, it turns out to be a horrible jangle and confounding of all relations. Especially the crimes that spring from love, seem right and fair from the actor's point of view, but, when acted, are found destructive of society. No man at last believes that he can be lost, nor that the crime in him is as black as in the felon. Because the intellect qualifies in our own case the moral judgments. For there is no crime to the intellect. That is antinomian or hypernomian, and judges law as well as fact. "It is worse than a crime, it is a blunder," said Napoleon, speaking the language of the intellect.[39] To it, the world is a problem in mathematics or the science of quantity, and it leaves out praise and blame, and all weak emotions. All stealing is comparative. If you come to absolutes, pray who does not steal? Saints are sad, because they behold sin, (even when they speculate,) from the point of view of the conscience, and not of the intellect; a confusion of thought. Sin seen from the thought, is a diminution or *less:* seen from the conscience or will, it is pravity or *bad*. The intellect names it shade, absence of light, and no essence. The conscience must feel it as essence, essential evil. This it is not: it has an objective existence, but no subjective.

21 Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself. The subject exists, the subject enlarges; all things sooner or later fall into place. As I am, so I see; use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are; Hermes, Cadmus, Columbus, Newton, Buonaparte, are the mind's ministers.[40] Instead of feeling a poverty when we encounter a great man, let us treat the new comer like a travelling geologist, who passes through our estate, and shows us good slate, or limestone, or anthracite, in our brush pasture. The partial action of each

strong mind in one direction, is a telescope for the objects on which it is pointed. But every other part of knowledge is to be pushed to the same extravagance, ere the soul attains her due sphericity. Do you see that kitten chasing so prettily her own tail? If you could look with her eyes, you might see her surrounded with hundreds of figures performing complex dramas, with tragic and comic issues, long conversations, many characters, many ups and downs of fate,—and meantime it is only puss and her tail. How long before our masquerade will end its noise of tambourines, laughter, and shouting, and we shall find it was a solitary performance?—A subject and an object,—it takes so much to make the galvanic circuit complete, but magnitude adds nothing. What imports it whether it is Kepler and the sphere; Columbus and America; a reader and his book; or puss with her tail?[41]

22 It is true that all the muses and love and religion hate these developments, and will find a way to punish the chemist, who publishes in the parlor the secrets of the laboratory. And we cannot say too little of our constitutional necessity of seeing things under private aspects, or saturated with our humors. And yet is the God the native of these bleak rocks. That need makes in morals the capital virtue of self-trust. We must hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous, and by more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action, possess our axis more firmly. The life of truth is cold, and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contritions, and perturbations. It does not attempt another's work, nor adopt another's facts. It is a main lesson of wisdom to know your own from another's. I have learned that I cannot dispose of other people's facts; but I possess such a key to my own, as persuades me against all their denials, that they also have a key to theirs. A sympathetic person is placed in the dilemma of a swimmer among drowning men, who all catch at him, and if he give so much as a leg or a finger, they will drown him. They wish to be saved from the mischiefs of their vices, but not from their vices. Charity would be wasted on this poor waiting on the symptoms. A wise and hardy physician will say, *Come out of that,* as the first condition of advice.

23 In this our talking America, we are ruined by our good nature and listening on all sides. This compliance takes away the power of being greatly useful. A man should not be able to look other than directly and forthright. A preoccupied attention is the only answer to the importunate frivolity of other people: an attention, and to an aim which makes their wants frivolous. This is

a divine answer, and leaves no appeal, and no hard thoughts. In Flaxman's drawing of the Eumenides of Æschylus, Orestes supplicates Apollo, whilst the Furies sleep on the threshold. The face of the god expresses a shade of regret and compassion, but calm with the conviction of the irreconcilableness of the two spheres.[42] He is born into other politics, into the eternal and beautiful. The man at his feet asks for his interest in turmoils of the earth, into which his nature cannot enter. And the Eumenides there lying express pictorially this disparity.[43] The god is surcharged with his divine destiny.

24 Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness,—these are threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way. I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me. I can very confidently announce one or another law, which throws itself into relief and form, but I am too young yet by some ages to compile a code. I gossip for my hour concerning the eternal politics. I have seen many fair pictures not in vain. A wonderful time I have lived in. I am not the novice I was fourteen, nor yet seven years ago. Let who will ask, where is the fruit? I find a private fruit sufficient. This is a fruit,—that I should not ask for a rash effect from meditations, counsels, and the hiving of truths. I should feel it pitiful to demand a result on this town and county, an overt effect on the instant month and year. The effect is deep and secular as the cause.[44] It works on periods in which mortal lifetime is lost. All I know is reception; I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not. I worship with wonder the great Fortune. My reception has been so large, that I am not annoyed by receiving this or that superabundantly. I say to the Genius, if he will pardon the proverb, *In for a mill, in for a million*. When I receive a new gift, I do not macerate my body to make the account square, for, if I should die, I could not make the account square.[45] The benefit overran the merit the first day, and has overran the merit ever since. The merit itself, so-called, I reckon part of the receiving.

25 Also, that hankering after an overt or practical effect seems to me an apostasy. In good earnest, I am willing to spare this most unnecessary deal of doing. Life wears to me a visionary face. Hardest, roughest action is visionary also. It is but a choice between soft and turbulent dreams. People disparage knowing and the intellectual life, and urge doing. I am very content with

knowing, if only I could know. That is an august entertainment, and would suffice me a great while. To know a little, would be worth the expense of this world. I hear always the law of Adrastia, "that every soul which had acquired any truth, should be safe from harm until another period."[46]

I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not 26
the world I *think*. I observe that difference, and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepance. But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought. Many eager persons successively make an experiment in this way, and make themselves ridiculous. They acquire democratic manners, they foam at the mouth, they hate and deny. Worse, I observe, that, in the history of mankind, there is never a solitary example of success,—taking their own tests of success. I say this polemically, or in reply to the inquiry, why not realize your world? But far be from me the despair which prejudges the law by a paltry empiricism,—since there never was a right endeavor, but it succeeded. Patience and patience, we shall win at the last. We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life. We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations, which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.[47]

Notes

1. Emerson, "Experience," *CW,* 9:482–483.
2. Emerson's source for "the Genius which, . . . too strongly," is the parable of Er in the conclusion to Plato's *Republic,* where the souls of the dead choose freely the lives, human or animal, they are to lead in their next incarnation. Then the daimon (or genius) leads them to the River of Lethe, where they are "all required to drink a measure of the water, and those who were not saved by their good

sense drank more than the measure, and each one as he drank forgot all things" (X, section xvi).

3. Emerson's source for this mythological tale is Plutarch, "Of Isis and Osiris," where the Sun, having discovered Rhea's infidelity with Saturn, "pronounced a solemn Curse against her . . . that she should not be delivered in any Month or Year." Hermes, also Rhea's lover, cast dice with the Moon and won "five new Days," which became the birthdays of the Egyptian gods. On "the first of these they say *Osiris* was born" (*Plutarch's Morals,* 1718, 4:68–69). The only intercalary day required by the modern calendar is 29 February. Hermes is the Greek god who conducted souls to the underworld; Osiris is the Egyptian god who served as lord of the underworld.
4. Emerson's source is *Deerbrook: A Novel,* 2 vols. (New York, 1839), 2:62, by Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), English novelist and religious and economic writer (*JMN,* 7:387, 418).
5. Two entries in his journal suggest that Emerson himself was the greedy and querulous farmer (*JMN,* 8:287, 397).
6. Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731–1794), Italian professor and librarian, published the first thorough and scholarly treatment of Italian literature. Thomas Warton (1728–1790), English poet, wrote the first history of his country's verse. Emerson intends either Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829), German author and critic, or his elder brother, August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845), also a major figure in German Romantic criticism and scholarship; both wrote histories of German literature.
7. "Homer's Goddess *Ate,*" as Robert Burton (1577–1640) called her in his literary, scientific, and philosophical study *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), had among her offices the duty of tormenting mankind "with some misery or other" (I, 2, iii, 10); the couplet is Burton's translation from the comedy *Podagra,* or *Gout,* ll. 185–186, by Lucian, second-century Greek rhetorician and satirist (*JMN,* 6:346).
8. Emerson often used the word "lovers" in the old sense of "friends"; in his essay on "Friendship," he writes, "High thanks I owe you, excellent lovers" (*CW,* 2:115).
9. Long after the fact, the sudden death of Emerson's son Waldo (1836–1842) from scarlet fever continued to affect him greatly and is arguably the occasion for his having written "Experience."
10. A reference by Emerson, though an inaccurate reading of the text, to *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), a Hindu mythological romance in verse, by Robert Southey (1774–1843), English poet, historian, and critic; the poem had been in Emerson's mind shortly after his son's death (*L,* 3:9–10).
11. Para coats are rubber raincoats, so called after the Brazilian seaport Pará, which is now best known as Belém. The process of vulcanization, which made possible the manufacture of all-rubber coats, was discovered by the American inventor Charles Goodyear (1800–1860) in 1839.

12. Emerson refers here to Gamaliel Bradford (1795–1839), his teacher at the Boston Public Latin School and the superintendent of the Massachusetts General Hospital.
13. In the journal version of this passage, Thoreau appears as an example of such promising but disappointing young men (*JMN,* 8:375).
14. The "occiput" is the back part of the skull.
15. The definition is Emerson's; see *JMN,* 8:382.
16. The journal version of this sentence suggests that this may be George Combe (1788–1858), the Scottish phrenologist (*JMN,* 9:120).
17. *"Pero si muove"* translates as "Nevertheless it moves"; the original is a variation on Galileo's legendary "Eppur si muove."
18. Michel Eyquem Montaigné (1533–1592), French essayist and skeptical philosopher.
19. "Bettine" is Elisabeth (Bettina) Brentano von Arnim (1785–1859), German writer whose correspondence with Goethe and *Die Günderode* (1840) were eagerly read by the Transcendentalists.
20. Although Emerson's source for the popular tradition that considered cherubim the most learned of angels is unknown, the first to make the claim was Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, a late fifth- to early sixth-century Christian theologian and philosopher, whose *Concerning the Celestial Hierarchy* became the foundation of medieval angelology; earlier, Emerson made the same claim in "Intellect," *CW,* 2:204.
21. Labrador spar, or Labradorite, is an iridescent feldspar.
22. This and the previous sentence refer to the utopian community at Brook Farm (1841–1847) in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, which, according to John Thomas Codman, had among its declared purposes "to substitute a system of brotherly coöperation for one of selfish competition; to secure to our children, and to those who may be entrusted to our care, the benefits of the highest physical, intellectual and moral education . . . and thus to impart a greater freedom, simplicity, truthfulness, refinement and moral dignity to our mode of life" (*Brook Farm* [Boston, 1894], pp. 11–12).
23. Emerson's source is *The Desâtîr or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Persian Prophets,* trans. Jonathan Duncan, 2 vols. (Bombay, 1818), 2:193.
24. This and the previous sentence reflect Emerson's investment of time in recent years corresponding and conversing with the ardent, cultivated young men and women who read and had already contributed to the *Dial* or would soon do so, and about whom he wrote with sympathy and detachment in "The Transcendentalist," above; his use of "eager" and "sentimental" in this sentence seems to be in the archaic sense of "impatient" and "overrefined," respectively.
25. Emerson's references here are to Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), French painter and founder of the French Classical tradition; Salvator Rosa (1615–1673), Italian Ba-

roque painter; Raphael's "Transfiguration of Christ"; Michelangelo's "Last Judgment"; "Communion of St. Jerome" by Domenichino (1581–1641), Italian painter of religious subjects and landscapes; the Uffizi Gallery, a museum in Florence, Italy; and the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

26. Throughout the nineteenth century and long before it, the word "lights" meant "luminaries" or "shining lights" and was used for eminent divines. Gentoos is an almost archaic synonym for "Hindus." Grahamites were disciples of Sylvester Graham (1794–1851), a New England reformer and the originator of the graham cracker, who believed in the physical and spiritual values of vegetarianism and especially the proper making of bread. In the 1847 edition, Emerson changed "Grahamites" to "corn-eaters" because the word was obsolescent.
27. During Emerson's entire literary career, the lack of an effective international copyright law had left both American and British writers vulnerable to piracy.
28. With this sentence, cf. Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* IV, i, 156–158.
29. Emerson had read the phrase "the newness" two or three years earlier in a letter about the English associationist, educator, and vegetarian James Pierrepont Greaves (1777–1842): "a great apostle of the Newness to many, even when neither he nor they knew very clearly what was going forward" (*Dial* 3 [October 1842]: 289). By 1855, Emerson adopted the phrase to describe, among other things, inspiration (*JMN,* 13:486).
30. With "the kingdom . . . without observation," cf. Luke 17:20–21.
31. Sir Everard Home (1756–1832), a British physician, believed that he was the first physician actually to see a human ovum.
32. Sophocles, *Antigone,* ll. 455–457.
33. Minerva is the Roman goddess of wisdom.
34. Thales (ca. 624–ca. 546 BCE), Greek philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer. Anaximenes of Miletus (585–528 BCE), Greek philosopher who argued that air is the source of all things.
35. Mencius (ca. 371–ca. 289 BCE), Chinese Confucian philosopher. Emerson's source for this wisdom of Mencius is the "Shang Mung," a book in *The Chinese Classical Work Commonly Called the Four Books,* trans. David Collie (Malacca, 1828), p. 39 (*JMN,* 8:354).
36. Emerson's source for this anecdote about Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), English dramatist and statesman, is Sir N. W. Wraxall, *Posthumous Memoirs of His Own Time,* 3 vols. (London, 1836), 1:43 (*JMN,* 8:346).
37. Here, "crescive," an already obsolete word when Emerson used it, means "growing."
38. To define human relations through a scientific metaphor, Emerson here drew on current demonstrations in physics that showed the behavior of static electricity.
39. In 1804, anxious about invasion and assassination and believing that the refugee

Louis Antoine de Bourbon-Conde, duc d'Enghien (1772–1804) was in league with the English, Napoleon had him kidnapped and killed. As Sir Walter Scott wrote in his biography of Napoleon, "the murder of the young and gallant prince, in a way so secret and so savage, had a deep moral effect upon the European world, and excited hatred against Buonaparte wherever the tale was told. In the well-known words of Fouché, the duke's execution was worse than a moral crime—it was a political blunder" (*Life of Napoleon Bonaparte,* 9 vols. [Edinburgh, 1827], 4:331). Joseph Fouché, 1st duc d'Otrante (1759–1820) was Napoleon's minister of police.

40. In Greek mythology, Cadmus is the founder of Thebes.
41. Emerson's inclusion of "Kepler and the sphere" in this sentence possibly references the astronomer's great discovery, in 1604, that the planet Mars revolves about the sun in an elliptical orbit.
42. Emerson interpreted imaginatively and accurately the emotional tensions of the illustration by the English artist John Flaxman (1755–1826) referenced in this and the previous sentence; his source is *Compositions from the Tragedies of Aeschylus. Designed by John Flaxman. . . .* (London, 1795), p. 24.
43. The Eumenides, or Erinyes, are the Greek gods of vengeance.
44. Here, "secular" means "long-lasting," as it does in "Nature looks provokingly stable and secular," "Circles," para 4, above.
45. Here, Emerson probably uses "macerate" to mean "waste away."
46. Emerson's source is Plato, *Phaedrus,* 248c, as quoted in *The Six Books of Proclus . . . on the Theology of Plato* (1816), 1:260 (*JMN,* 8:350).
47. In the journal from which it is drawn, this sentence is followed by one that, if Emerson had used it, would have given a distinctly Carlylean tone to the conclusion of "Experience": "The symbol of this is the *working King* like Ulysses, Alfred, Czar Peter" (*JMN,* 9:53). Czar Peter is Peter the Great, or Peter I (1672–1725), of Russia.

Chapter 19

"Experience"

In our struggle for responsibility, we battle someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called "experience." It is expressionless, impenetrable, ever the same. The adult has already experienced everything: youth, ideals, hopes, woman. It was all illusion.—Often we feel intimidated or embittered. Perhaps he is right. What can our retort be? We have not yet experienced anything.[1]

But let us attempt to raise the mask. What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us? This above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted; he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right. Saying this, he smiles in a superior fashion: this will also happen to us—in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture before the long sobriety of serious life. Thus, the well-meaning, the enlightened. We know other pedagogues whose bitterness will not even concede to us the brief years of "youth;" serious and grim, they want to push us directly into life's drudgery. Both attitudes devalue and destroy our years. More and more we are assailed by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand "experience," the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and apathy. Such is life. That is what adults tell us, and that is what they experienced.

Yes, that is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality. Have they ever encouraged us to anything great or new or forward-looking? Oh, no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. All meaning—the true, the good, the beautiful—is grounded in itself. What, then, does experience signify?—And herein lies the secret: because he never raises his eyes to the great and meaningful, the philistine has taken experience as his gospel. It has become for him the warrant of life's commonness. But he has never grasped that there is something other than experience, that there are values—inexperienceable—which we serve.

Why is life without meaning or solace for the philistine? Because he knows experience and nothing else. Because he himself is desolate and without spirit. And because he has no inner relationship to anything other than the commonplace, the established routine.

We, however, know something different, which experience can neither give to us nor take away: that there is truth, even if all previous thought has been in error. Or: that fidelity shall be maintained, even if no one has done so yet. Such will cannot be taken from us by experience. Yet—are our elders, with their tired gestures and their superior hopelessness, right about *one* thing—namely, that what we *experience* will be sorrowful and that only in the inexperienceable can we ground all courage and meaning? Then the spirit would be free. But again and again life would drag it down, because life, the sum of experience, would be without solace.

We no longer understand such questions, however. Do we then still lead the life of those who are ignorant of the spirit? Whose sluggish ego is buffeted by life like waves against the rocks? No. Each of our experiences has its content. We ourselves will give it content from out of our spirit.—He who is thoughtless acquiesces in error. "You will never find the truth!" he exclaims to the researcher. "That is my experience." For the researcher, however, error is merely an aid to truth (Spinoza).[2] Experience is meaningless and devoid of spirit only for the spiritless. To one who strives, experience may be painful, but it will scarcely lead him to despair.

In any event, he would never obtusely give up and allow himself to be lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the philistine. For the philistine; you will have noted, only rejoices in every new meaninglessness. He remains in the right. He reassures himself: spirit does not *really* exist. Yet no one demands stricter subordination or sterner "reverence" in the presence of "spirit." For if he were to practice criticism, he would have to create as well.[3] That he cannot do. Even the experience of spirit, which he undergoes against his will, becomes for him spiritless.

> Tell him
> He should honor the dreams of his youth
> When he becomes a man.[4]

Nothing is so hateful to the philistine as the "dreams of his youth." (And sentimentality is often the protective coloring of this hatred.) For what appeared to him in these dreams was the voice of the spirit, calling him, too, in his time, as it does everyone. Youth is for him the eternally alarming reminder of these things. Therefore he battles it. He tells young people of that gray, overwhelming experience and teaches them to laugh at themselves. Especially since "experience" without spirit is comfortable, if also hopeless.

Again: we know a different experience. It can be hostile to spirit and destroy many blossoming dreams. Nevertheless, it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate, because it can never be without spirit while *we* remain young. Always one experiences only oneself, as Zarathustra says at the end of his wanderings.[5] The philistine has his "experience"; it is the eternal one of spiritlessness. The youth will experience spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains to anything great, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person.—When he becomes a man, the youth will be compassionate. The philistine is intolerant.

Notes

"Erfahrung" (GS2, 54–56) was published, under the pseudonym "Ardor," in *Der Anfang*, October 1913. Translated by Lloyd Spencer and Stefan Jost.

1. In a letter of June 23, 1913, to Herbert Belmore, Benjamin announces: "Yesterday I wrote here [in Freiburg] an article, 'Erfahrung.' Possibly the best thing I've yet written for *Der Anfang*." In a second letter to Belmore written on this date, he says, quoting his friend's letter: " 'The less we are troubled and confused by those awful "personal" experiences . . .' You'll find out just how well that expresses my own view when you read my essay 'Erfahrung.' " A few weeks later, on July 17, he writes to Belmore: "Please read 'Erfahrung.' . . . If it is not good enough, and if it can be improved, please send it to me with your comments. . . . [Georges] Barbizon [editor of *Der Anfang*], who has accepted it, is not at all critical. I want to remain wholly receptive to art and philosophy for quite some time, perhaps until I have written a novella. Above all, I do not want to write for *Der Anfang*" (CWB, 32, 34, 44–45). The essay " 'Erfahrung' " was, in fact, the last of Benjamin's writings to appear in *Der Anfang*. He casts a retrospective glance at this essay, and its militant idealism, in a note written probably in 1929: "In an early essay I mobilized all the rebellious forces of youth against the word 'Erfahrung.' And now this word has become a basic element in many of my things. Nevertheless I have remained true to myself. For my attack broke through the word without destroying it. It reached the center of the matter" (GS2, 902). In the essay, Benjamin uses both *erleben* and *erfahren* to mean "experience," without explicitly distinguishing between these terms as he will do in his later work.

2. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) defined error as incomplete or fragmentary knowledge; see his *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, known in English as *The Ethics* (1677), part 2, proposition 35.

3. "Denn würde er Kritik üben—so müsste er ja mitschaffen."

4. Benjamin cites Friedrich Schiller's historical drama *Don Carlos* (1787), 4:21:4287–4289.

5. Reference is to the beginning of part 3 of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra; 1883–1884, 1892), which Benjamin evidently quotes from memory: "Man erlebt immer nur sich selber." The text reads: "*man erlebt endlich nur noch sich selber* (ultimately, one experiences only oneself).

Experience 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 mantlepiece, 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.

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 1C14, 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 1C19, 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

INFANCY AND HISTORY

An Essay on the Destruction of Experience

To Claudia Rugafiori

O matematici, fate lume a tale errore! Lo spirito non ha voce, perché dov'é voce è corpo.

[O mathematicians, shed light on error such as this! The spirit has no voice, because where there is voice there is body.]

LEONARDO DA VINCI

ONE

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,

with relief. From this point of view a visit to a museum or a place of touristic pilgrimage is particularly instructive. Standing face to face with one of the great wonders of the world (let us say the *patio de los leones* in the Alhambra), the overwhelming majority of people have no wish to experience it, preferring instead that the camera should. Of course the point is not to deplore this state of affairs, but to take note of it. For perhaps at the heart of this apparently senseless denial there lurks a grain of wisdom, in which we can glimpse the germinating seed of future experience. The task which this essay proposes, taking up the legacy of Benjamin's project 'of the coming philosophy',[2] is to prepare the likely ground in which this seed can mature.

GLOSS

A story by Tieck, titled *Das Lebensüberflüss* (Life's Superfluity), depicts two penniless lovers who gradually renounce all possessions and all outside life to the point where they live closed up in their room. Finally, when they can no longer find wood for fuel, they burn the wooden ladder connecting their room with the rest of the house, and are left in isolation from the outside world, owning nothing and alive to nothing but their love. This ladder – Tieck gives us to understand – is experience, sacrificed by them to the flames of 'pure knowledge'. When the owner of the house (who here represents the claims of experience) returns and looks for the old ladder that led to the floor rented by the two young tenants, Heinrich (as the male protagonist is called) derides him with these words:

> 'He wishes that old experience should support him, like a man on the ground who would raise himself up, one step at a time, to the heights of highest understanding; but never thus will he be able to attain the immediate intuition of those who, like us, have now abolished all those trivial moments of experience and its stages, to sacrifice them, as the ancient Parsee law so has it, to the living, purifying flame of pure knowledge.'

Tieck explains the elimination of the ladder – i.e. experience – as a 'philosophy of poverty imposed on them by fate'. It is just such a 'philosophy of poverty' that can explain the modern rejection of experience by the young (but not only the young:

'metropolitan Indians' and tourists, hippies and family breadwinners alike are affiliated – far more than they would be prepared to acknowledge – by the same expropriation of experience). For they are like those cartoon characters of our childhood who can walk on thin air as long as they don't notice it; once they realize, once they experience this, they are bound to fall.

For this reason, even if objectively their condition is a dreadful one, there has never been a more revolting sight than that of a generation of adults which, having destroyed all remaining possibilities of authentic experience, lays its own impoverishment at the door of a younger generation bereft of the capacity for experience. When humankind is deprived of effective experience and becomes subjected to the imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats – in other words, when the only possible experience is horror or lies – then the rejection of experience can provisionally embody a legitimate defence.

The widespread existence of drug addiction today can also be seen in terms of this destruction of experience. What distinguishes modern addicts from the intellectuals who discovered drugs in the nineteenth century is that the latter (at least the less lucid among them) could still delude themselves that they were undergoing a new experience, while for the former this is nothing more than the discarding of all experience.

TWO

In one sense, the expropriation of experience was implicit in the founding project of modern science.

> There remains but mere experience, which when it offers itself is called chance; when it is sought after, experiment. But this kind of experience is nothing but a loose faggot, and mere groping in the dark, as men at night try all means of discovering the right road, whilst it would be better and more prudent either to wait for day or procure a light and then proceed. On the contrary the real order of experience begins by setting up a light, and then shows the road by it, commencing with a regulated and digested, not a misplaced and vague course of experiment, and thence deducing axioms, and from these axioms new experiments . . .[1]

In these words of Francis Bacon, experience in the traditional sense – meaning what can be translated into maxims and proverbs – is already condemned irretrievably. The distinction between logical truths and truths of sufficient reason (which Leibniz formulates thus: 'When we expect the sun to rise tomorrow we are acting as empiricists because it has always been so until today. The astronomer alone can judge with sufficient reason') subsequently sanctions this condemnation. Because, against repeated claims to the contrary, modern science has its origins in an unprecedented mistrust of experience as it was traditionally understood (Bacon defines it as a 'forest' and a 'maze' which has to be put in order). The view through Galileo's telescope produced not certainty and faith in experience but Descartes's doubt, and his famous hypothesis of a demon whose only occupation is to deceive our senses.

The scientific verification of experience which is enacted in the experiment – permitting sensory impressions to be deduced with the exactitude of quantitative determinations and, therefore, the prediction of future impressions – responds to this loss of certainty by displacing experience as far as possible outside the individual: on to instruments and numbers. But traditional

experience thereby lost all real value. For – as demonstrated by the last work of European culture still integrally based on experience: Montaigne's *Essays* – experience is incompatible with certainty, and once an experience has become measurable and certain, it immediately loses its authority. There is no formulating a maxim nor telling a story where scientific law holds sway. Experience, with which Montaigne concerns himself, took so little account of science that he goes so far as to define its substance as a 'subjet informe, qui ne peut rentrer en production ouvragère'[2] on which it is impossible to base any firm judgement ('il n'y a aucune constante existence, ny de notre estre, ny de celui des objects.... Ainsin il ne se peut establir rien de certain de l'un à l'autre ...').[3]

The idea of experience as separate from knowledge has become so alien to us that we have forgotten that until the birth of modern science experience and science each had their own place. What is more, they were even connected to different subjects. The subject of experience was common sense, something existing in every individual (Aristotle's 'judging principle' and the *vis aestimativa* of medieval psychology, neither of them quite what we mean by good sense), while the subject of science is the *noūs* or the active intellect, which is separate from experience, 'impassive' and 'divine' (though, to be precise, knowledge did not even have a subject in the modern sense of an *ego*, but rather the single individual was the *sub-jectum* in which the active, unique and separate intellect actuated knowledge).

It is in this separation between experience and science that we have to see the meaning – an extremely concrete one, in no way abstruse – of the disputes dividing Aristotelian interpreters in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages on the singularity and separation of the intellect and its communication with the subjects of experience. Mind [*noūs*] and soul [*psychē*] are not one and the same thing for ancient thought (nor for medieval thought, at least up to Aquinas), and the intellect is not, as we are accustomed to think, a 'faculty' of the soul: it does not belong to it in any way, but is 'separate, individuated, impassive', according to the celebrated Aristotelian formula, and communicates with it to bring about knowledge. Consequently, for Antiquity, the central problem of knowledge is not the relationship between a subject and an object, but the relationship between the one and the many. Thus classical thought takes no

cognizance of the question of experience as such, but what is posed for us as the question of experience arose naturally in Antiquity as the question of the relation (of the 'participation', but also of the 'difference', as Plato will say) between the separate intellect and particular individuals, between the one and the many, between the intelligible and the sensory, between the human and the divine. It is this difference which the chorus in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* underlines, characterizing human knowledge – against Agamemnon's *hubris* – as a *páthei máthos*, what is learned only through and after suffering, and excludes any possibility of foresight – that is, of knowing anything whatsoever with certainty.

Traditional experience (in the sense with which Montaigne is concerned) remains faithful to this separation of experience and science, human knowledge and divine knowledge. It is in fact the experience of the boundary between these two spheres. This boundary is death. Hence Montaigne can formulate the ultimate goal of experience as a nearing to death – that is, man's advance to maturity through an anticipation of death as the extreme limit of experience. But for Montaigne this limit remains something that cannot be experienced, which can only be approached ('si nous ne pouvons le joindre, nous le pouvons approcher'). But at the very moment when he is urging us to become 'familiar' with death and to 'cast off its strangeness' ('ostons luy l'estrangeté, pratiquons le, n'ayon rien si souvent en teste que la mort') he reverts to irony about those philosophers 'si excellens mesnagers du temps, qu'ils ont essayé en la mort mesme de la gouster et savourer, et ont bandé leur esprit pour voir que c'estoit ce passage; mais il ne sont pas revenus nous en dire les nouvelles'.[4]

In its search for certainty, modern science abolishes this separation and makes experience the locus – the 'method'; that is, the pathway – of knowledge. But to do this it must begin to recast experience and rethink intelligence, first of all expropriating their different subjects and replacing them with a single new subject. For the great revolution in modern science was less a matter of opposing experience to authority (the *argumentum ex re* against the *argumentum ex verbo*, which are not in fact irreconcilable) than of referring knowledge and experience to a single subject, which is none other than their conjunction at an abstract Archimedian point: the Cartesian *cogito*, consciousness.

Through this interpolation of experience and science in a single subject (which, being universal and bounded and at the same time an *ego*, unites in itself the properties of the separate intellect and the subject of experience), modern science re-effects that liberation from the *páthei máthos* and that conjunction of human knowledge with divine knowledge which constituted the precise character of the experience of the Mysteries and found their pre-scientific expression in astrology, alchemy and Neoplatonic speculation. For it was not in classical philosophy but in the sphere of the religious mysteries of late Antiquity that the boundary between the human and the divine, between the *páthei máthos* and pure science (which, according to Montaigne, can only be approached, never touched) was crossed for the first time, in the idea of unutterable *páthēma* in which the initiate experienced his own death ('he knows the end of life', says Pindar) and thereby acquired the means 'to see a sweeter prospect of death and time gone by'.

The Aristotelian conception of homocentric celestial spheres as pure, divine, 'intelligences', immune from change and corruption and separate from the earthly sublunar world which is the site of change and corruption, rediscovers its original sense only if it is placed in the context of a culture which conceives of experience and knowledge as two autonomous spheres. Connecting the 'heavens' of a pure intelligence with the 'earth' of individual experience is the great discovery of astrology, making it not an antagonist, but a necessary condition of modern science. Only because astrology (like alchemy, with which it is allied) had conjoined heaven and earth, the divine and the human, in a single subject of fate (in the work of Creation) was science able to unify within a new ego both science and experience, which hitherto had designated two distinct subjects. It is only because Neoplatonic Hermetic mysticism had bridged the Aristotelian separation between *noûs* and *psychē* and the Platonic difference between the one and the many, with an emanationist system in which a continuous hierarchy of intelligences, angels, demons and souls (think of the angel-intelligences of Avicenna and Dante) communicated in a 'Great Chain' which begins and ends with the One, was it possible to establish a single subject as the basis for 'experimental science'. It was by no means irrelevant that the universal mediator of this ineffable union between mind and senses, between the corporeal and

incorporeal, the divine and the human, was, in the speculative thought of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, a *pneuma*, a 'spirit', since it is precisely this 'subtle spirit' (the *spiritus phantasticus* of medieval mysticism) which will provide something more than a name for the new subject of science, which in Descartes is indeed manifest as *esprit*. The whole development of modern philosophy is contained, like a chapter in what Spitzer called 'historical semantics', by the semantic contiguity between *pneuma–spiritus–esprit–Geist*, and it is precisely because the modern subject of experience and knowledge – like the very concept of experience – has its roots in a mystical notion that any explication of the relationship between experience and knowledge in modern culture is bound to come up against almost insurmountable difficulties.

Through science, it is in fact Neoplatonic mysticism and astrology that make their entry into modern culture, not Aristotle's separate mind and incorruptible cosmos. And if astrology was subsequently abandoned (only subsequently: we must not forget that Tycho Brahe, Kepler and Copernicus were also astrologers, as was Roger Bacon, a fervent advocate of astrology who anticipates experimental science in many respects), it is because its fundamental principle – the union of experience and knowledge – had been so much assimilated as a principle of the new science through the constitution of a new subject that its essentially mythic–divine apparatus became superfluous. The rationalism/irrationalism which is so irreducably a part of our culture has a hidden genesis in this primary kinship between astrology, mysticism and science; the astrological revival among Renaissance intellectuals is the most striking symptom of this. Historically, this genesis is linked to what has now been firmly established thanks to Warburghian philology: that the humanistic restoration of Antiquity was a restoration not of classical Antiquity but of the culture of late Antiquity, in particular of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. Thus a critique of mysticism, astrology and alchemy must necessarily imply a critique of science, and only the recovery of a dimension in which science and experience were each to find their own place of origin could prevail over the rationalism/irrationalism opposition.

In the Mysteries, the conjunction of experience and knowledge consisted of an event without speech, which culminated in

the death and rebirth of the silenced initiate. In alchemy, it was enacted in the process of Creation whose fulfilment it was. But in the new subject of science, it becomes something no longer unutterable, but something that is already spoken in every thought and every utterance; not a *páthēma*, but a *máthēma* in the original sense of the word: something that is always prescient in every act of knowledge, the basis and subject of every thought.

We are so used to representing the subject as a substantial psychic reality – that is, as a consciousness perceived as the site of psychic processes – that we forget how, on its first appearance, the 'psychic' and substantial character of the new subject was certainly not obvious. At the moment of its manifest emergence in the Cartesian formulation, it is not in fact a psychic reality (it is neither Aristotle's *psychē* nor the *anima* of the medieval tradition), but a pure Archimedean point ('nihil nisi punctum petebat Archimeds, quod esset firmum ac immobile . . .')[5] which came into being precisely through the quasi-mystical reduction of all psychic content except the pure act of thought.

> ('Quid vero ex iis quae animae tribuebam? Nutriri vel incedere? Quandoquidem jam corpus non habeo, haec quoque nihil sunt nisi figmenta. Sentire? Nempe etiam hoc non fit sine corpore, et permulta sentire visus sum in somnis quae deinde animadverti me non sensisse. Cogitare? Hic invenio: cogitatio est; haec sola a me divelli nequit.')[6]

In its original pure state, the Cartesian subject is nothing more than the subject of the verb, a purely linguistic-functional entity, very similar to the 'scintilla synderesis' and the 'apex of mind' of medieval mysticism, whose existence and duration coincide with the moment of its enunciation.

> ('. . . hoc pronuntiatum, Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concepitur, necessario esse verum . . . Ego sum, ego existo; certum est. Quandiu autem? Nempe quandiu cogito; nam forte etiam fieri posset, si cessarem ab omni cogitatione, ut illico totus esse desinerem.')[7]

The impalpability and insubstantiality of this ego is betrayed by the difficulty Descartes experiences in naming it and identifying it outside the realm of the pure utterance *I think, therefore I am*,

and the dissatisfaction with which, compelled to abandon the imprecision of the word *res*, he lists the traditional vocabulary of psychology ('res cogitans, id est mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio'),[8] pausing at the end, with some hesitation, on the word *mens* (which, in the 1647 French edition of the *Meditations*, becomes *esprit*). None the less, immediately after (with a leap of logic whose incoherence did not escape the first readers of the *Meditations*, notably Mersenne and Hobbes, who reproaches Descartes over a deduction analogous to 'je suis promenant, donc je suis une promenade'), this subject is presented as a substance to which, as distinct from material substance, are attributed all the properties which characterize the soul of traditional psychology, including sensation ('Res cogitans? Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque, et sentiens').[9] And it is this substantive I, in which the union of *noūs* and *psychē*, experience and knowledge, takes place, that provides the basis on which later thought, from Berkeley to Locke, will build the concept of a psychic consciousness replacing the soul of Christian psychology and the *noūs* of Greek metaphysics as a new metaphysical subject.

The transformation of its subject does not leave traditional experience unchanged. Inasmuch as its goal was to advance the individual towards maturity – that is, an anticipation of death as the idea of an achieved totality of experience – it was something complete in itself, something it was possible to have, not only to undergo. But once experience was referred instead to the subject of science, which cannot reach maturity but can only increase its own knowledge, it becomes something incomplete, an 'asymptotic' concept, as Kant will say, something it is possible only to *undergo*, never to *have*: nothing other, therefore, than the infinite process of knowledge.

Thus anyone proposing to recover traditional experience today would encounter a paradoxical situation. For they would have to begin first of all with a cessation of experience, a suspension of knowledge. But this is not to say that they would thereby have rediscovered the kind of experience which it is possible both to undergo and to have. The fact is that the old subject of experience no longer exists. It has split. In its place there are now two subjects, which are represented to us in a novel at the beginning of the seventeenth century (in the very

same period when Kepler and Galileo are publishing their discoveries), advancing side by side, inseparable companions in a quest whose adventurousness matches its futility.

Don Quixote, the old subject of knowledge, has been befuddled by a spell and can only undergo experience without ever having it. By his side, Sancho Panza, the old subject of experience, can only have it, without ever undergoing it.

GLOSSES

I *Fantasy and experience*

Nothing can convey the extent of the change that has taken place in the meaning of experience so much as the resulting reversal of the status of the imagination. For Antiquity, the imagination, which is now expunged from knowledge as 'unreal', was the supreme medium of knowledge. As the intermediary between the senses and the intellect, enabling, in phantasy, the union between the sensible form and the potential intellect, it occupies in ancient and medieval culture exactly the same role that our culture assigns to experience. Far from being something unreal, the *mundus imaginabilis* has its full reality between the *mundus sensibilis* and the *mundus intellegibilis*, and is, indeed, the condition of their communication – that is to say, of knowledge. And since, according to Antiquity, it is the imagination which forms dream images, this explains the particular relationship to truth which dreams have in the ancient world (like divination *per somnia*) and to efficacious knowledge (like medical treatment *per incubationem*). This is still true in primitive cultures. Devereux reports that the Mojave (not unlike other shamanistic cultures) believe that shamanistic powers and knowledge of myths, as well as the actions and chants that refer to them, are acquired in dreams – and, moreover, that if they were acquired in a waking state, they would remain sterile and ineffective until they were dreamed:

> A shaman, who had allowed me to note down and learn his therapeutic ritual chant, explained that I would not have the same power to heal because I had not empowered and activated his chants through oneiric learning.

Within the formula with which medieval Aristotelianism defines this mediating function of the imagination ('nihil potest homo intelligere sine phantasmate'),[10] the homology between phantasy and experience is still perfectly clear. But with Descartes and the birth of modern science, the function of phantasy is assumed by the new subject of knowledge: the *ego cogito* (observe that in the technical vocabulary of medieval philosophy, *cogitare* referred rather to the discourse of the imagination than to the act of intelligence). Between the new *ego* and the corporeal world, between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, there is no need for any mediation. The resulting expropriation of the imagination is made evident in the new way of characterizing its nature: while in the past it was not a 'subjective' thing, but was rather the coincidence of subjective and objective, of internal and external, of the sensible and the intelligible, now it is its combinatory and hallucinatory character, to which Antiquity gave secondary importance, that is given primacy. From having been the subject of experience the phantasm becomes the subject of mental alienation, visions and magical phenomena – in other words, everything that is excluded by real experience.

II *Cavalcanti and Sade (need and desire)*

The removal of imagination from the realm of experience, however, casts a shadow on the latter. This shadow is desire, the idea of experience as fugitive and inexhaustible. For according to a notion already current in classical psychology and subsequently fully developed in medieval culture, imagination and desire are closely connected. Indeed, the phantasm, which is the true source of desire ('phantasia ea est, quae totum parit desiderium'), is also – as mediator between man and object – the condition for the attainability of the object of desire and therefore, ultimately, for desire's satisfaction. The medieval discovery of love in the works of the Provençal and *stilnovo* poets is, from this point of view, the discovery that love takes as its subject not the immediate sensory thing, but the phantasm; that is, simply the discovery of the phantasmatic character of love. But given the mediating nature of imagination, this means that the phantasm is also the subject, not just the object, of Eros. In fact, since love has its only site in imagination, desire never directly encounters the object in its corporeality (hence the

apparent 'Platonism' of the erotic in *stilnovo* and troubadour poetry), but an image (an 'angel', in the strict sense of the word, for the love poets and the Arab philosophers: a pure imaging separate from the body, a *substantia separata* which, through its desire, moves the celestial spheres), a 'nova persona' which is literally the product of desire (Cavalcanti: 'Formando di desio nova persona'), within which the boundaries between subjective and objective, corporeal and incorporeal, desire and its object are abolished. It is precisely because here love is not the opposition between a desiring *subject* and an *object* of desire, but has in the phantasm, so to speak, its subject–object, that the poets can define its character (in contrast with a *fol amour* which can only consume its object without ever being truly united with it, without ever experiencing it) as a *fulfilled love* [*fin'amors*], whose delights never end ['gioi che mai non fina']. By linking this with Averroes's theory which sees in the phantasm the site of complete union between the individual and the active intellect, they can transform love into a soteriological experience.

But once imagination has instead been excluded from experience as unreal, and its place has been taken by the *ego cogito* (now the subject of desire, 'ens percipiens ac appetens', in Leibniz's words), the status of desire changes radically: it becomes essentially insatiable. At the same time the phantasm, which mediated and guaranteed the attainability of the object of desire (allowing it to be experienced), now becomes the very sum of its unattainability (its inexperiencibility). Thus in Sade (in contrast with Cavalcanti), the desiring I, excited by the phantasm ('il faut monter un peu son imagination', the Sadeian characters reiterate), finds before it only a body, an *objectum* which it can only consume and destroy without ever being satisfied, since in it the phantasm is infinitely elusive and hidden.

The expulsion of imagination from the sphere of experience indeed sunders what Eros – as the son of Poros and Penia – united in himself: *desire* (tied to imagination, insatiable and boundless) and *need* (tied to corporeal reality, measurable and theoretically able to be satisfied), in such a way that they can never coincide in the same subject. As the desiring subject, the Sadeian man always has before him another man as the subject of need, for need is nothing but the inverse form of his own desire and the sum of its essential otherness. It is this schism in Eros which Juliette expresses most acutely when, speaking of the special desire of the

chevalier, who wants to satisfy himself with the *caput mortuum* of her digestion, she exclaims: 'Tenez, à l'instant, si vous le désirez; *vous en avez l'envie, moi j'en ai le besoin.*'

Hence the Sadeian universe's necessity of perversion, which, by conjoining need and desire, converts the essential frustration of desire into pleasure. For what the pervert recognizes is that it is his own desire (for what does not belong to him) that appears in the other as need. To Juliette's statement he could answer: 'What you feel as the intimate estrangement of corporeal need is what I feel as the estranged intimacy of desire: *your need is my want; my want is your need.*' If, in Sade – despite everything, and for all the expropriation of experience which he embodies so prophetically in the repetitive delirium of his characters – there is pleasure, there is joy; if in his novels there lives on a contorted version of the pure Edenic project of troubadour and *stilnovo* poetry, it is thanks to perversion, which, in the Sadeian Eros, fulfils the same function which *stilnovo* poetry entrusted to the phantasm and the woman-angel. Perversion is the redeeming archangel which rises in flight from the bloody theatre of Eros to raise the Sadeian man to heaven.

The split between need and desire, currently so much debated, is not something that can be healed voluntaristically, nor is it a knot that an ever blinder political practice can dissolve with a gesture. This should be eloquently evident from the place of desire in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (which Lacan, with customary acumen, was able to theorize as *objet à* and as *désir de l'Autre*). For in Hegel, desire – which emerges, significantly, as the first moment of self-consciousness – can only try to negate its own object, but never finds satisfaction in it. Indeed, the desiring I achieves a certainty of itself only through suppression of the other:

> Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself.... In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence. Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well.[11]

That pleasure which, in Sade, is made possible by perversion, in Hegel is enacted through the bondsman, who mediates the lord's pleasure:

> The lord relates himself mediately to the thing through the bondsman; the bondsman, *qua* self-consciousness in general, also relates himself negatively to the thing, and takes away its independence; but at the same time the thing is independent *vis-à-vis* the bondsman, whose negating of it, therefore, cannot go the length of being altogether done with it to the point of annihilation; in other words, he only works on it. For the lord, on the other hand, the immediate relation becomes through this mediation the sheer negation of the thing, or the enjoyment of it. Desire fails to do this because of the thing's independence; but the lord, who has interposed the bondsman between it and himself, takes to himself only the dependent aspect of the thing and has the pure enjoyment of it. The aspect of its independence he leaves to the bondsman, who works on it.[12]

But the question which Sadeian man continues to ask amid the din of a dialectical machine which, *ad infinitum*, defers its answer to the total social process, is precisely this: 'What about the pleasure of the slave? And how can we once more join the two split halves of Eros?'

III *Experience, quest, adventure*

The problem of experience emerges in a specific way in the medieval *quests*. For the relationship between experience and science in the medieval Christian world is governed by a principle for which Honorius of Autun writes an exemplary formulation: 'Before original sin, man knew good and evil: good through experience [*per experientiam*], evil through science [*per scientiam*]. But, after sin, man knows evil through experience, and good only through science.' The quest – that is, the attempt of the man who can know good only *per scientiam* to experience it – expresses the impossibility of uniting science and experience in a single subject. Thus Percival, who *sees* the Grail but fails to experience it, is the emblematic figure of the quest – no less than Galahad, whose experience of the Grail is plunged into the ineffable. From this point of view, the Grail (the impossible vanishing point at which the break in knowledge is healed and the two parallel lines of science and experience meet) is simply

what constitutes the matter of human experience as an aporia, literally as the absence of a road [*a-poria*]. Thus the quest is the direct opposite of that *scientia experimentalis* (though as such, it also prefigures it) whose project was already dreamt of by Roger Bacon at the end of the Middle Ages, and which will later find its codification with Francis Bacon.

While scientific experiment is indeed the construction of a sure road (of a *methodos*, a path) to knowledge, the *quest*, instead, is the recognition that the absence of a road (the *aporia*) is the only experience possible for man. But by the same token, the *quest* is also the opposite of the adventure, which in the modern age emerges as the final refuge of experience. For the adventure presupposes that there is a road to experience, and that this road goes by way of the extraordinary and the exotic (in opposition to the familiar and the commonplace). Instead, in the universe of the *quest* the exotic and the extraordinary are only the sum of the essential aporia of every experience. Thus Don Quixote, who lives the everyday and the familiar (the landscape of La Mancha and its inhabitants) as extraordinary, is the subject of a *quest* that is a perfect counterpart of the medieval ones.

IV *The 'dark night' of Descartes*

The affinity between mystical experience and the Cartesian experience of the *ego cogito* is more concrete than one might think. We have notes by Descartes such as the *Olympiques*, in which he describes how he had begun to understand the foundation for a marvellous discovery [*cepi intelliger fundamentum inventi mirabilis*]. According to Baillet, Descartes's first biographer, who transcribed these notes in the third person:

> On the tenth day of November one thousand six hundred and nineteen, having retired quite filled with his enthusiasm and entirely occupied by the thought of having on that day discovered the foundation of the marvellous science, he had three successive dreams in a single night, which he fancied could only have come from on high [there follows the account of the three dreams].

While he was still dreaming, Descartes began to interpret his own dream; on waking, he continued the interpretation 'calmly and . . . open-eyed':

> The fright that had struck him in the second dream was, he believed, a mark of synderesis, that is to say a remorse of conscience for the sins which he must have committed throughout the course of his life until then. The thunderbolt that he heard was the sign of the Spirit of Truth which descended upon him to enter into him.[13]

Contrary to what Baillet appears to believe, synderesis is not a mere remorse of conscience; it is a technical term used in the Neoplatonic mysticism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to designate the highest and most delicate area of the soul; it is in direct communication with the supersensory, and has never been corrupted by original sin. Perhaps these pages give us a glimpse of the future experience of the *ego cogito*, and furnish one more proof of the close proximity between two poles of our culture which we tend all too often to perceive as antithetical. We see that the *cogito*, like mystical synderesis, is what remains of the soul when, at the end of a 'dark night', it is stripped of all its attributes and content. The heart of this transcendental experience of the I has been signally described by an Arab mystic, Al-Hallaj: 'I am *I* and the attributes are no more; I am *I* and the qualifications are no more . . . I am the pure subject of the verb.'

CEDRIC ROBINSON

Coming to terms: the Third World and the dialectic of imperialism*

The masses in history

Let me begin by asking your consideration of an extraordinary declaration, one which I believe will stand us in good stead as we review, as we explore the dynamic development of black peoples in the nineteenth century. I am beginning in this way because I believe the most important issue is conceptualisation: how are we to conceptualise what we were, what we are, what we are becoming? The task is to achieve a means of conceptualising change, specifically the developments among black peoples which constituted their response to the incorporation of their labour and lives into the emerging system of world capitalism in the nineteenth century. For this particular period, the nineteenth century, and because of the structural, material and ideological systems and the organisational imperatives within which the black reaction took form, a specific methodological instruction is warranted; a way of comprehending the movements of slaves in the Caribbean, North America and the Iberian colonies of central and south America, and the resistance movements on the African continent. The declaration is by C.L.R. James, it was written in 1948 or so, and concerns the formation of social forces in general, though it was originally addressed quite

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directly to James' colleagues in the Fourth International. In *Notes on Dialectics* (which I believe is published this year for the first time), James observed:

> Now what is one to say of a political organisation that goes to the people with the proposal to organise a body of professional revolutionaries, in the Leninist manner of 1903?...
>
> What do such 1903 revolutionaries of 1948 propose to organise? A new international or *genuine* revolutionaries?... *There is nothing more to organise.* You can organise workers as workers. You can create a special organisation of revolutionary workers. But once you have those two you have reached an end. Organisation as we have known it is at an end. The task is to abolish organisation. The task today is to call for, to teach, to illustrate, to develop *spontaneity* – the free creative activity of the proletariat. The proletariat will find its method of proletarian organisation.[1]

For many years James was associated with a sense of revolutionary theory and revolutionary organisation which has been identified with spontaneity. Within the understanding of spontaneity there is a basic kind of revolutionary thought which I want to use essentially as a premise for the study of black liberation and its development in the nineteenth century. James, it might be added, was not alone with his spontaneity. The period during which he was writing spawned others. Spontaneity had been looked at, thought about, thought through by other people. Indeed, I want to quote a small section from Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* to give you a sense of spontaneity. Reich wrote – and he was writing in the mid 1940s:

> Usually an important social awareness begins to assume a more or less clear form among the population long before it is expressed and represented in an organised way. Today, 1944, the hatred of politics, a hatred based on concrete facts, has undoubtedly become general. If, now, a group of social scientists has made correct observations and formulations, that is, observations and formulations that clearly reflect the objective social processes, then the 'theory' must of necessity be in agreement with the vital feelings of the masses of people. It is as if two independent processes moved in a convergent direction and came together at *one* point at which the social process and the will of the masses *became one* with sociological knowledge.[2]

That is one of the premises of spontaneity. The basic argument and belief is that organisation and ideas come out not from the leadership but from the masses. Organisation and ideas. Now, this is essentially the position of people like James and Reich, who argued that it is

inappropriate for an elite to emerge with a sense of what organisations are required, what structures are required and then begin to influence or to impose this notion on a following, on a collectivity. It was a sense of human history and human organisation which is extraordinarily opposed to the ways in which we normally think of these things. The dominant paradigms of political organisation, social organisation, social movements presume the extraordinary leader, the extraordinary figure, out of which come organisations, structure, ideology. James and Reich were reversing them.[3] I believe it is important to keep this perception in mind while we review the dialectic of imperialism and the culture of liberation. It is a key to black mass movements formed in communities and societies within which class formation was tenuous if not wholly absent.

The Negro in western thought

In the 500 years which have led directly to this moment, the destinies of African peoples have been profoundly affected by the development of economic structures and political institutions among European peoples. Moreover, it has been the nature of these relationships between Africans and Europeans that both western civilisation and the cultures of African peoples have been increasingly contorted and perverted as the years have accumulated. For the West, the appropriation of the means and forces of African reproduction have had unintended and unacceptable significance. The psychic, intellectual and cultural consequences of Europe's intrusion into African history have served to accelerate the formulation of the mechanisms of self-destruction inherent in western civilisation, exacerbating its native racisms, compelling further its imperatives for power and totalitarian force, while subverting the possibilities of the rationalisation of its states, its diverse cultural particularities and its classes. Everywhere one turns or cares to look, the signs of a collapsing world are evident; at the centre, at its extremities, the systems of western power are fragmenting. Thus the British empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, the German empire in the middle years of this century and the American empire today are simultaneously forewarnings, witnesses and the history of this dissolution; and the development of each testified to the characteristic tendency of capitalist societies to amass violence for domination and exploitation and a diminishing return, a dialectic, in its use. 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...'

My subject, however, is not primarily the modern western world and its contortions, so my remarks on the West will tend to remain general and descriptive rather than detailed and analytic. I intend to focus on the nineteenth century, the century of the modern world's adolescence, and on the formation and emergence of African peoples.

Before the African and New World black liberation movements of the post-Second World War era, few western scholars of the African experience had any conception of the existence of an ideologically based or epistemologically coherent historical tradition of black radicalism. The presence of such a tradition, the possibilities and conditions of its existence were literally and configuratively alien to these observers. Given the presumptions these students of Africa and its diaspora made about the bases of the identities, cultures, ethnicities and group formations of these various African peoples, neither space nor time, geography or periodicity, led them to suspect the presence of such a tradition. In its stead, these observers reconstructed social and ideological movements among blacks to conform to the exigencies of specific locales and of immediate social causes. If in their minds such movements sometimes were allowed some resemblance to one another, this followed from the fact of a general racial order shared by most blacks, whether as slaves or ex-slaves, rather than the presence of an historical or political consciousness or a social tradition among blacks. An ideological connective was presumed remote between the African mutineers on the Amistad or the captors of the *Diane*; the Maroon settlements in Pernambuco, Florida, Virginia, Jamaica and the Carolinas; the slave revolutionists of the Revolution in Haiti; the slave insurrectionists of the Caribbean and early nineteenth-century America; the black rebels of the regions of the Great Fish river, the Limpopo and the Zambezi in southern Africa; the black emigrationists of the American ante-bellum period; the untolled wars across the African landscape in the 1900s; and their twentieth-century successors in Africa and the diaspora. These events were seen as geographically and historically bounded acts, episodes connected categorically by the similarity of their sociological elements (e.g. slave or colonial societies) but evidently unrelated in the sense of an emerging social movement inspired by historical experience and a social ideology. Such scholarship, of course, was either inspired or at least influenced by the ideological requirement that modern western thought obliterate the African. As an ideological current, its adherents were not always Europeans. It permeated the intellectual culture and even compromised the work of some of those Africans' descendants.

There is little which is novel in the remark that in the New World and in the colonial clusters in the African continent and the Indian and Atlantic oceans the African became the most enduring of domestic enemies, and consequently the object around which a more specific, particular and exclusive conception of humanity was moulded. As a slave, the African was the embodiment of a moral, political and economic contradiction demanding resolution. Of all the neologisms put into use, the term 'Negro' proved the most enduring. The 'Negro', that is the colour black, was both a negation of African and a unity of

opposition to white. The construct of Negro, unlike the older terms African, Moor or Ethiope, suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography. The Negro had no civilisation, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place and, finally, no humanity which might command consideration. The Negro constituted a marginally human group, a collection of Things of convenience for use and/or eradication. Obviously, no historical political tradition could be associated with such beings. This was the point when the Harvard historian Justin Winsor told a young black scholar a century ago that he, that is Winsor, had never considered the Negro as a 'historical character'; it was also the heart of the matter when Hugh Trevor-Roper announced in 1963: 'Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...'[4]

Thus it came about that one of the first responsibilities of the black intelligentsia was to destroy the Negro. This was the precondition for the reassertion of the historical tradition of African peoples – the attack on culture with a specific political significance.

I think one of the most extraordinary statements on this question, and probably one of the most frequently misunderstood, is an essay that Karl Marx wrote in 1843, called 'On the Jewish Question'. Much of what he discovered about western consciousness and the Jew is applicable to the Negro. Marx has been interpreted to say that it was important and necessary for human emancipation that the Jews be destroyed. It is written in some fashion in that essay but I do not believe that is what Marx at any time meant to say. He was involved in the first attack, the attack on culture. The attack on culture assumed the form of an attack on conceptualisations, or an attack on ideas, or an attack on the meanings of things. Marx understood that in early nineteenth-century German society it was not possible for the masses of Germans to understand the Jews. He also presumed it was not necessary for them to understand the Jews. And so he used the term Jew to signify precisely its opposite; he used the term Jew to talk about the non-Jew. And in that process he began to reverse, he began to transform, he began to attack the culture which was associated with, linked to, and a support of the oppression that he as a Jew knew and that non-Jews would have to come to some sense of in Germany. He developed his argument in a fairly simple way:

> Let us consider the real Jew, not the Sabbath Jew, whom Bruno Bauer [the man he was addressing in his essay] considers, but the every day Jew. Let us not seek the secret of the Jew in his religion but let us seek the religion in the real Jew. What is the profane base of Judaism: practical needs, self-interest. What is the worldly cult of the Jew: huckstering. What is his worldly god: money.[5]

Then he writes:

> Judaism has been preserved, not in spite of history, but by history. It is from its own entrails that civil society ceaselessly engenders the Jew. What was, in itself, the basis of the Jewish religion? Practical need, egoism.[6]

There is only one way in which we can begin to understand what he was saying, what he was dealing with. He was confronting that part of the culture – the German culture and Jewish culture – which argued that the Jew was significant because of selection, because of a peculiar culture, because of a peculiar national identity. Marx was denying it. He said, it was not the Jews who had made themselves, but society which required the Jews, which allowed the Jews to maintain themselves. He was arguing that the culture had conceptualised a people and a process in the wrong way, in an absurd way, in an irrational way, ultimately, in a very destructive way. As we can see, Marx was not entirely consistent with his distinction between the religious Jew (the historical Jew) and the western arte-factual Jew (the actual Jew). Still, even his slips did not obscure his intent.

He went on to say, in fact, that Judaism was the ideology of civil society, not of Jews. He was arguing, in fact, that the Jew had become the symbol of the society, a symbol that it could not deal with directly, and so had to project on to some thing, which it then had – in Marx's term – to alienate from itself. The society had developed a symbol for itself, but outside of itself. And it called that symbol the Jew. Marx was saying, it is no longer possible to understand German society unless you recognise it in the Jew, in its Jew.

The first attack is an attack on culture. Marx refused to accept the terms, the language, the conceptualisations of the society which he was addressing. He could not accept them because he understood them to be distortions, very pointed, very clearly related to the oppression of a people. Black scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries eventually came to a similar insight at a similar moment. But remember the premise, I am not necessarily saying that this was Marx's idea: Marx organised the idea. In the same fashion, black intellectuals *organised* their ideas on their radical tradition.

Black thought and the traditions of the West

The difference for these ideologues was not one of interpretation but comprehension. The makings of an essentially African response, strewn across the physical and temporal terrain of societies conceived in western civilisation, has been too infrequently distinguished. Only over time has the setting for these events been integrated into the

tradition. The social cauldron of black radicalism is western society. Western society, however, has been its location and its objective condition but not – except in a most perverse fashion – its specific inspiration. Black radicalism is a negation of western civilisation, but not in the direct sense of a simple dialectical negation.

It is certain that the evolving tradition of black radicalism owes its peculiar moment to the historical interdiction of African life by European agents. In this sense, the African experience of the past five centuries is simply one element in the mesh of European history: some of the objective requirements for Europe's industrial development were met by the physical and mental exploitation of Asian, African and native American peoples. This experience, though, was merely the condition for black radicalism – its immediate reason for and object of being – but not the foundation for its nature or character. Black radicalism, consequently, cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis. It is not a variant of western radicalism whose proponents happen to be black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of western civilisation. Walter Rodney understood this so well when he wrote:

> ...the similarity of African survivals in the New World points not to tribal peculiarities but to the essential oneness of African culture. That culture was the shield which frustrated the efforts of Europeans to dehumanise Africans through servitude. The slave may have appeared in a profit and loss account as an 'item', a 'thing', a piece of 'property', but he faced his new situation as an African, a worker, and a man. At this level of perception, it is quite irrelevant to enquire from which tribe or region a particular African originated.[7]

As we have seen in slave society and post-slave society, such a signification of African culture was accessible for practical and ideological reasons only in a most grotesque form, that is racism.

African labour as capital

Tracing the genesis of this conception among black intellects requires coming to terms with the development of capitalism as it related to black peoples. Necessarily, this requires a consideration of the African slave trade and slave labour, and the forms of forced labour and contractual labour which followed in both the historical and structural senses in the old and new worlds and on the African continent itself.[8] The scale of the importance of black labour to the formation of

capitalist society can in part be measured in numbers. Philip Curtin has estimated that approximately ten million African workers were transported to the New World between 1451 and 1870.[9] Even more instructive, however, is his observation that 'before the nineteenth century ... for 300 years more Africans than Europeans crossed the Atlantic each year'.[10] Marx, on the other hand, without Curtin's historical advantage, attempted to understand the structural relation of African labour to the development of capitalism. In the mid-nineteenth century, with the process still unfolding, he wrote to Annenkov:

> Direct slavery is as much the pivot of our industrialism today as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery no cotton; without cotton no modern industry. Slavery has given value to the colonies; the colonies have created world trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale machine industry ... Slavery is therefore an economic category of the highest importance.[11]

And a few years later, in a slightly more agitated voice, he concluded:

> The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.[12]

First, African workers were transmuted by the perverted canons of mercantile capitalism into property; then, African labour power as slave labour was integrated into the organic composition of nineteenth-century manufacturing and industrial capitalism, sustaining the emergence of an extra-European world market within which the accumulation of capital was garnered for the further development of industrial production.

In the New World, following the models provided by the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch, the British (and the French) had substantially substituted human capital for commodities. I will follow the British trade since, for a variety of reasons, it is possible to be more precise about its dimensions.

To be sure, the British had begun by exporting those colonised peoples to whom they had immediate access, that is the Irish. In the eighteenth century, for example, perhaps as many as 10,000 men, women and children were 'transported' from Ireland to the New World as so-called convicts.[13] There they joined the numbers of poor Englishmen drawn from a growing reservoir in England of which

Edmund Morgan would comment: 'In the eyes of unpoor Englishmen the poor bore many of the marks of an alien race.'[14] As Richard B. Moore has indicated:

> Somewhat less onerous [than African slavery], but still quite oppressive, was the system of indentured slavery of Europeans, forced in one way or another into the colonies whether on the mainland or in the islands. Writing of this, the Jesuit priest, Joseph J. Williams, relates how Irish peasants were 'hunted down as men hunt down game, and were forcibly put on board ship, and sold to the planters of Barbadoes'.[15]

Nevertheless, the appetite of colonial production for labour increasingly outpaced the supply. Having decimated those aboriginal populations they had encountered in the New World, the English mercantile and planter bourgeoisie found it necessary and expedient to expand their Irish strategy to West Africa. And as they did so, the scale of their enterprise grew beyond anything seen in human history.

In the last twelve years of the seventeenth century, the legal importation of African labourers to British colonies in the Indies and North America reached almost 8,000 per year.[16] The illegal trade during the same period has been estimated to be a quarter of this size. Curtin, whose figures are certainly most conservative, calculates that the total import of African workers between 1690 and 1700 was close to 76,500. Since the loss in transit was about 23 per cent, this meant that in this eleven-year period, more than 99,000 Africans were embarked onto the Atlantic on their way to slave labour. By the end of the eighteenth century and the abolition of the legal British slave trade in 1807, those first 99,000 Africans had been augmented to 2,579,400.[17] Perhaps as many as 400,000 of them, however, never saw the end of the Atlantic in the West. They died 'in transit'. Such was one tragic meter of the profound extent to which the development of the capitalist world system depended on labour it could not produce itself. One other measure, this of the national and racial sympathies of the European merchants of slaves themselves, is that their crews died at even higher rates. An English sailor's song put it simply: 'Beware and take care of the Bight of Benin: for one that comes out, there are forty go in.'[18]

Thirty-eight per cent of the slave labour force transported by English shippers was relocated to Jamaica. In almost equal parts, their origins had been along the routes which fed into the slave ports at the Bight of Biafra, the Gold Coast, Central Africa, the Bight of Benin and Sierra Leone.[19] This ethnic distribution, however, was not the result of consistent or persisting patterns of recruitment. Orlando Patterson concludes, for example, that:

> ... during the earlier half of the period between 1655 and 1700 the largest single group of slaves came from among the Akan and Ga-Andangme peoples of the coastal strip of Ghana ... Forty per cent of the slaves entering the island during the last quarter of the seventeenth century came from Angola ... About 30 per cent of these later arrivals came from among the Ewe speaking people of Dahomey, particularly from among the Fon.
>
> ... between 1700 and 1730 there was a rapid falling off of the number of slaves coming from Angola while the number from the Slave Coast greatly increased to the position of being, quite possibly, the largest single contributor.
>
> ... The slaves from Ghana had also increased proportionately and may well have been the second largest section of the African slaves in the island ...
>
> During the first half or so of the period between 1730 and 1790 there was a rapid falling off of slaves from the Slave Coast and a proportionate increase in those from Ghana and the Niger and Cross deltas. Between them they supplied about 70 per cent of the African slaves entering the island ...
>
> Finally, during the last seventeen years of the trade there was a striking reappearance of slaves from Southwestern Africa, particularly from the region of the Congo. In all, about 40 per cent of all the slaves entering the island during this period came from this area; about 30 per cent from the Niger and Cross deltas; about 20 per cent from the Gold Coast; another 5 per cent from the Windward Coast; and the remainder from the other areas of Africa.[20]

In many ways this Jamaican trade followed the patterns established by the mercantile European predecessors of the English. They, too, had deposited the majority of their African labour in the islands of the Greater and Lesser Antilles. The Portuguese with their Brazilian territories had been the exception – an exception which accounted for approximately 38 per cent of the total number of African peoples brought to the New World.[21]

The British merchants sent approximately 20 per cent of their slave cargo in the eighteenth century to the North American colonies. However, this amounted to less than 5 per cent of the total number of Africans brought to the New World by European merchants. Curtin's best estimate is that 399,000 Africans were brought to the English colonies during the entire slave trading period (and another 28,000 came to Louisiana by way of French traders.) This African population, however, differed from that distributed in Jamaica in that at least a quarter of these peoples had been shipped from Angolan ports. Almost as many came from the Bight of Biafra, the Gold Coast and Senegambia, with decreasing numbers from Sierra Leone, the Bight of Benin

and Central Africa.[22] In South Carolina, blacks made up 60 per cent of the colony's population in the eighteenth century. In Virginia, the comparable figure was 40 per cent. They were used on the tobacco and, later, the cotton plantations, but they also worked 'in mines, salt- and rope-works; and they trained as shipwrights, blacksmiths, and as various kinds of woodworkers, including carpenters, coopers, wheelwrights, and sawyers'.[23] Those who were imported from Africa directly were termed 'outlandish', to distinguish them from the 'new Negroes' of the fields and the deracinated, acculturated artisan slaves. These distinctions were practical considerations for the colonists, as Gerald Mullin has demonstrated:

> In sample runs of the South Carolina *Gazette* in the early 1750s and 1771 there was clear evidence of tribal cooperation in advertisements for the return of four 'new Gambia men'; three Angolans, 'all short fellows'; six other Angolans ... and four men from the 'Fullah Country'.[24]

It was from the efforts of men and women such as these that the black settlements of Virginia's piedmont and the maroon peoples of the Caribbean and South America and among the Seminoles of Florida would be formed. Another estimated 55,000 fled to the British forces and loyalist settlements when the colonists pursued the fear of their own enslavement to the point of Revolution.[25] However, enough of the slaves remained in the colonies of North America and the Indies to play a significant role in the development of the English imperial economy. Eric Williams argued:

> The triangular trade ... gave a triple stimulus to British industry. The Negroes were purchased with British manufactures; transported to the plantations, they produced sugar, cotton, indigo, molasses and other tropical products, the processing of which created new industries in England; while the maintenance of the Negroes and their owners on the plantations provided another market for British industry, New England agriculture and the Newfoundland fisheries. By 1750 there was hardly a trading or a manufacturing town in England which was not in some way connected with the triangular or direct colonial trade. The profits obtained provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capita in England which financed the Industrial Revolution.[26]

This trade, this movement of black workers, did not, however, end with slavery's legal termination. Leopold's Congo, Harry Johnston's Central Africa, Cecil Rhodes' Southern Africa, Lugard's West Africa, Portuguese and French Africa, as well as the New World's slave

descendants, all contributed to the further development of the capitalist world system. As peasants, as tenant farmers, as migrant labourers, as day labourers, domestic servants and wage labourers, their expropriation extended into the present century. Even in the destruction of the means of production, the wars which Marx had stipulated as inevitable, black labour was pressed into service. They were exempt from no aspect of exploitation.

The imprint of the black historical tradition

Here, then, are the crude outlines of a trade and system of production which brought to the distant hemisphere a portion of the evolving people who would forge a black radical tradition. In that hemisphere, they began in the sixteenth century.

In Mexico, or New Spain as it was called, the native population is thought by some to have been as high as twenty-five million at the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, it was to become an object of the most intensive exploitation by its Spanish conquerors. Within nine decades, 'diseases, wars, relocations, and the ecological changes wrought by Spanish settlement and control'[27] and, it should be added, slave labour, had reduced the indigenous inhabitants to an estimated 1,075,000. This decimation of the 'Indian' population, coupled with the royal decrees of 1542 (the *Nuevas Leyes*) which 'prohibited the further enslavement of Indians except as punishment for rebellion against Spanish rule', resulted in a significant demand for additional labour towards the end of the sixteenth century.[28] The new source of labour was to be the west coast of Africa. David Davidson surmises: 'It is now fairly certain that in the period 1519-1650 the area received at least 120,000 slaves, or two-thirds of all the Africans imported into the Spanish possessions in America.'[29] The industries of sugar and cloth production, and later of silver mining, were the primary sites to which African labour was assigned. As Indian labour atrophied during the second half of the century, a consequence of natural decline and legal restrictions, it was replaced by African workers.[30] By 1570, Mexico contained over 20,000 Africans; by 1650, their numbers were believed to be closer to 35,000, a supplement to the more than 100,000 Afromestizoes of black-Indian parentage.[31] By the latter period, Davidson states, between 8,000 and 10,000 Africans could be found working on the sugar plantations and cattle ranches in the eastern region around the coastal lowlands between Veracruz and Panuco and the slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental; another 15,000 were absorbed by the silver mines and ranches of the regions north and west of Mexico City; 3,000-5,000 were bound to similar industries located between Puebla and the Pacific coast; and 20,000-50,000 were employed in urban occupations in Mexico City and the Valley of

Mexico.

At first, resistance among the slaves took the form of flight to native or 'Indian' settlements. The notarial archive, for example, of the Mexican city of Puebla de los Angeles, which is 'virtually complete from 1540 on',[32] is filled with the official reaction to mid-sixteenth-century runaways. Fugitives drew the attention of Hernan Cortes as early as 1523, and the first general uprising is thought to have occurred in 1537.[33] Some of these Africans, however, did not completely sever their contacts with the Spanish. Once freed by their own wits, they returned to plague the Spanish colonists, appropriating food, clothes, arms, tools and even religious artefacts from the colonists' towns, villages and ranch homes and from travellers along the roads connecting the ports and settlements. Once armed, the Spanish would refer to these 'fugitives' as *cimarrones*.[34] (The English would incorporate the term into their own language as 'maroons'.) Soon, however, the fugitive slaves grew numerous enough to begin the formation of their own settlements, communities which came to be known in Mexico as *palenques*.

> By the 1560s fugitive slaves from the mines of the north were terrorising the regions from Guadalajara to Zacatecas, allying with the Indians and raiding ranches. In one case maroons from the mines of Guanajuato joined with unpacified Chichimec Indians in a brutal war with the settlers. The viceroy was informed that they were attacking travellers, burning ranches, and committing similar 'misdeeds'. To the east, slaves from the Pachuca mines took refuge in an inaccessible cave from which they sallied forth periodically to harass the countryside. Negroes from the Atotonilco and Tonavista mines joined them with arms, and created an impregnable *palenque*.[35]

The response of the representatives of the Spanish state was unequivocal. Between 1571 and 1574, royal decrees detailed new systems of control and surveillance, stipulating progressively harsher treatment of fugitives: fifty lashes for four days' absence; 100 lashes and iron fetters for more than eight days' absence; and death for those missing for six months, commuted in some cases to castration.

> Yet neither the code of 1571-1574 nor the issuance of restrictive legislation in the 1570s and 1580s was of any avail. A viceregal order of 1579 revealed that the contagion of revolt nearly covered the entire settled area of the colony outside of Mexico City, in particular the provinces of Veracruz and Pánuco, the area between Oaxaca and Gualtuco on the Pacific coast, and almost the whole of the *Gran Chichimeca*. Only emergency repressive measures and the continued importation of Africans maintained Mexico's slave labour supply.[36]

African resistance in Mexico continued to mature in form and character. The struggle against slavery was being transferred into the battle to preserve the collective identity of African peoples. By the early seventeenth century, according to official colonial documents, at least one black community, San Lorenzo de los Negros, had acquired by war and treaty its right to existence. In the mountains near Mt Orizaba, led by a man called Yanga, whose origins were among the Bran nation of the Senegambia region, the 'Yanguicos' had won formal status as a free black settlement. The mountains, however, seemed to promise much more security to some Yanguicos and other *cimarrones* than the words and treaties of their Spanish oppressors. Throughout New Spain *palenques* continued to multiply and, with a still undetermined frequency, to give occasion for the establishment of officially recognised free communities. Between 1630 and 1635, for example, an agreement was reached with *cimarrones* whose redoubts had been established in the mountains of Totula, Palmilla, Tumbacarretas and Totolinga near Veracruz. The town of San Lorenzo Cerralvo became their free settlement. In 1769, a similar history preceded the establishment of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Amapa, near the southern tip of the modern state of Veracruz.[37] Their existence has come to light through quite recent research into the early colonial history of New Spain. It is always possible that these few villages were the only instance of such occurrences, but not very probable.[38] It is more likely that further research will identify their familiars, traced perhaps through work among the black communities of present-day Mexico.[39] In Colombia, their revolts are detailed in 1530, 1548 and again in the 1550s. In 1552, Venezuela had its first major slave revolt. This rebellion of slaves who had worked in the mines of Buria was defeated in 1555. Nevertheless, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, independent black communities with legal standing in the eyes of the state agents had begun to appear.[40]

In Brazil, which dominated the Portuguese slave trade, the maroon settlements (*quilombos*) which began in the sixteenth century would extend into the next. Ernesto Ennes, in no way sympathetic to the fugitives, nevertheless recorded in 1948 from his review of the documents in the Arquivo Histórico Colonial in Lisbon that he found 'traces in every corner of Brazil' of *quilombos*.[41] In the Pernambuco region, the greatest settlement of all, the extraordinary state of Palmares endured from 1605 to 1695.

Palmares (the name stood for the several settlements (*palmars*) which made up a community), though necessarily agrarian, was even more preoccupied with its defence. In 1645, Bartholomeus Lintz, acting as a scout for the expeditions which the Dutch were to mount against Palmares, was the first hostile European to discover that the state consisted of several settlements (two major *palmars* of 5,000

inhabitants, and several small units totalling 6,000). By 1677, there were ten major *palmars*, one of which was the capital (*Macoco*) where the 'king' (*Ganga-Zumba*, from the Zande, signifying consensus ruler) resided, the whole state spanning over sixty leagues.[42] It was then estimated that the population numbered between 15,000 and 20,000, a mixture of creoles and Africans largely drawn from the Angola-Congo regions. For almost a century, neither the Portuguese nor the interloper Dutch, nor the creole *moradores* could destroy it. 'Between 1672-94,' R.K. Kent tells us, 'it withstood on the average one Portuguese expedition every fifteen months.'[43] Palmares did fall eventually, in 1694, the result of campaigns launched by successive Portuguese governors of Pernambuco (João da Cunha Sotto-Mayor, Marques de Montebello, and Melo de Castro). The last expedition sent against it consisted of nearly 3,000 men and was in the field for several months. The final siege started on 10 November 1693 and lasted until early February of the following year. The total cost of the adventure was estimated by Melo de Castro at somewhere near 1,400,000 cruzados.[44]

On the night of 5 February 1694, 'Zumby' (*Ganga-Zumba*), who organised the defence of Palmares, having discovered that his position on Barriga mountain had been nearly encircled, sought a last desperate chance to escape. The result was described by Colonel Domingos Jorge Velho, the leader of the Portuguese forces:

> During the second watch of that night, between the fifth and sixth of February, suddenly and tumultuously [Zumby] with all his people and the equipment which could follow him through that space, made an exit. The sentinels of that post did not perceive them almost until the end. In the rear-guard Zumby himself was leaving, and at that point he was shot twice. As it was dark, and all this was taking place at the edge of the cliff, many – a matter of about two hundred – fell down the cliff. As many others were killed. Of both sexes and all ages, five hundred and nineteen were taken prisoner.[45]

In Pernambuco, again according to Governor Melo de Castro, 'This happy victory was regarded as no less important than the expulsion of the Dutch. It was, accordingly, celebrated by the whole population with displays of lights for six days and many other demonstrations of joy, without any command being given to them...' Characteristically, Ennes attributed this excitement to the 'moral influence which it conferred on the authorities'.[46]

In this same century, the slaves of Jamaica joined the tradition of those in Brazil and Mexico (where important revolts occurred in 1608 and 1670). The mid-century exploded with revolts on that island in 1669, 1672 (twice), 1678, 1682, 1685 and 1690. Barbara Kopytoff has described it most aptly:

> During the era of slavery, communities of maroons, or escaped slaves, sprang up throughout the New World. Wherever there were slave plantations, there was resistance in the form of runaways and slave revolts; and wherever mountains, swamps, or forests permitted the escaped slaves to gather, they formed communities. These ranged in size from Palmares, in Brazil, with over ten thousand people, to the handfuls of runaways who hid on the fringes of plantations in the American South. While most ... were destroyed ... a few could not be reduced or even contained...[47]

And so the litany continued into the eighteenth century: in the Guianas of Berbice, Essequibo and Demerara in the 1730s and 1760s; in Venezuela in the 1730s and 1780s. In North America, the maroon communities of the mid-century in Florida, Virginia and the Carolinas were anticipated by the slave revolt in New York city in 1712 and that of Stono, South Carolina, in 1739. Gerald Mullin found in Virginia newspapers alone advertisements for nearly 1,300 fugitives from slavery between 1730 and 1800.[48]

The eighteenth century ended with a movement of slaves to match the significance of Palmares during the preceding century. In Haiti, slave armies managed the defeat of French, Spanish and English militaries – the most sophisticated armies of the day. James summed up his reconstruction of that revolution of slaves:

> No one could have guessed the power that was born in them when Boukman gave the signal for revolt on that stormy August night in 1791. Rebellion, war, peace, economic organisation, international diplomacy, administration, they had shown their capacity ... The national struggle against Bonaparte in Spain, the burning of Moscow by the Russians that fill the histories of the period, were anticipated and excelled by the blacks and Mulattoes of the island of San Domingo. The records are there. For self-sacrifice and heroism, the men, women and children who drove out the French stand second to no fighters for independence in any place or time. And the reason was simple. They had seen at last that without independence they could not maintain their liberty...[49]

From Haiti, the revolution extended to Louisiana in 1795, Virginia in 1800 and Louisiana again in 1811. Quite recently, Eugene Genovese has remarked:

> Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in 1822 consciously looked to Haiti for inspiration and support, and as late as 1840 slaves in South Carolina were interpreting news from Haiti as a harbinger of their own liberation ... The slaveholders ... understood the

> potential of what they saw. References to the example and inspiration of Haiti reverberated across black America. The impact on David Walker may be readily seen from his great *Appeal* ... And the slaveholders were not amused by celebrations of Haitian independence such as that staged in 1859 by free Negro masons in St. Louis, Missouri – a slave state ... The revolution in Saint-Domingue propelled a revolution in black consciousness throughout the New World.[50]

From Haiti and the 'one great militia', which DuBois and Genovese claim the white South constituted,[51] the revolutionary tradition lit up the horizon of Brazil's Bahia region. From 1807 to 1835, the chroniclers of Bahia recorded revolt after revolt: 1807, 1809, 1813, 1816, 1826, 1827, 1830 and the great series in 1835. Jamaica and the Guianas continued in the tradition, culminating in the Great Revolt in Jamaica in 1831. By 1838, slavery in Jamaica had been officially dismantled. As Mary Reckord has put it: 'The slaves had demonstrated to some at least of those in authority that it could prove more dangerous and expensive to maintain the old system than to abolish it.'[52] Similar moments arrived in the United States in 1863 and Brazil twenty-five years later.[53]

In Africa itself, the same historical tradition was no less apparent in the nineteenth century. But we must also keep in mind the warning issued by George Padmore and C.L.R. James that it was the colonial habit not to maintain a very close record of these events:

> The difficulty ... is to get accounts written in any detail. The British send out their punitive expeditions against revolting tribes and do not necessarily mention them in the annual colonial reports. But if the revolt awakens public interest, a commission will investigate and make a report. This report will frequently clash violently with the accounts of participants, eye-witnesses, correspondents of newspapers, native and European, and persons living in the colony at the time. The French and Belgians, however, publish little of this kind...[54]

The European presence in Africa at the beginning of the century had been largely confined to a few settlements in southern Africa and to trading posts and factors on the northern, western and eastern coasts. Even by the 1850s, James and Padmore assert, 'it is unlikely that more than one tenth of Africa was in European hands'.[55] Nevertheless, the century had opened with resistance. In southern Africa, the Xhosas' Hundred Years War (1779-1880) with the white colonists was already into its third decade. Before its obviously impermanent conclusion, it would take this people as deeply into the historical tradition as any

black people, even the Haitians, had dared. The *Nongquase* or 'cattle-killing' of 1856-7, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Xhosas by self-inflicted starvation, continues to evade western comprehension.[56] The Zulu also came to the point of military resistance. From the emergence of the Zulu state in the early decades of the century to the wars of the 1870s and 1880s, the Zulus fought the disruption of the material and spiritual being. Eight thousand Zulu fell in battle in 1879 alone, the same year that the assegais defeated the gun in the terrible encounter at Isandhlwana. As the century progressed, the European intrusion became more marked and resistances more numerous.

In Angola, the Portuguese fought wars of pacification in the 1850s and the 1880s. In what is now Tanzania, the Yao and Hehe in the 1890s confronted the Germans who transgressed the bounds of good manners. Machemba, the Yao general, had written to them in Swahili: 'If it should be friendship that you desire, then I am ready for it, today and always; but to be your subject, that I cannot be.'[57] In the 1870s the Ashanti began their wars with the British; in the 1890s the Mendi of Sierra Leone did the same. And in 1896, as a complement to the achievement of the Haitian slaves 100 years earlier, Menelik II of Ethiopia mounted an army of 100,000 in order to defeat the Italian invader. There were, of course, many others: the Yoruba of West Africa, the Baganda of East Africa, the peoples of the Atlas Mountains in the north, the Shona, Ndebele, Ndlambe and Ngqika of the south. Many of them had to wait a long time for their celebration, many are still waiting.

It was, though, the pattern, the construction, the evolving form which was and is most interesting. The historical integration which the slave trade had accomplished almost instantaneously in the New World was now occurring on the continent. Discrete societies were slowly achieving the social organisation which the attack on colonialism required. This achievement as a structural phenomenon was a concomitant of the world system and the imperialist expansion which it demanded. Its coherence, however, was based on the African identities of its peoples. As a structural process, its dynamics were seated in the very expansion of imperialism. This was the dialectic of imperialism and liberation, the contradiction which compelled the appearance of resistance and revolution out of the condition of oppression – even from its ideology. As Michael Taussig has written, with early colonial Colombia in mind:

> The scanty accounts of Christianisation suggest that conversion and consolidation of belief remained little more than a formality throughout the entire epoch of slavery. Indeed ... the slaveowners regarded Christianised slaves as more rebellious and as poorer workers than those not indoctrinated, and would pay less for them.

> ... Black popular religion could hardly endorse slavery and all it implied, nor could the slaves remain content with equality in God's eyes but not in their own.[58]

The nature of the black radical tradition

This brings me finally to the character or, more accurately, to the ideological, philosophical and epistemological natures of the black movement whose dialectical matrix was capitalist slavery and imperialism. What events have been most consistently present in its phenomenology? Which social processes has it persistently reiterated? From which social processes is it demonstrably, that is historically, alienated? How does it relate to the political order? Which ideographic constructs and semantic codes has it most often exhibited? Where have its metaphysical boundaries been most certainly fixed? What are its epistemological systems? These are the questions which we now must address, relieved from paradigmatic and categorical imperatives whose insistence stemmed largely from their uncritical application, the unquestioned presumption that regardless of their historical origins they were universal. Having arrived at an historical moment, at a conjuncture, at an auspicious time where the verities of intellectual and analytical imitation are no longer as significant to the black ideologue as they once were, where the dominant traditions of western thought have once again been revealed to have a casual rather than systemic or organic relationship to the myriad transformations of human development and history, when – and this is the central issue – the most formidable apparatuses of physical domination and control have disintegrated in the face of the most unlikely oppositions (India, Algeria, Vietnam, Guinea-Bissau, Iran, Mozambique), the total configuration of human experience requires other forms.

The first step is relatively easy because it was always there, always indicated, in the histories of the radical tradition. Again and again, in the reports, casual memoirs, official accounts, eye-witness observations and histories of each of the tradition's episodes, from the sixteenth century to the events recounted in last week's or last month's journals, one note has occurred and recurred: the absence of mass violence.[59] Western observers, often candid in their amazement, have repeatedly remarked that in the vast series of encounters between blacks and their oppressors, only some of which have been recounted above, blacks have seldom employed the level of violence which they (the westerners) understood the situation required. When we recall that in the New World of the nineteenth century the sixty or so whites killed in the Nat Turner insurrection was one of the largest totals for that century; when we recall that in the massive uprisings of slaves in 1831 in Jamaica – where 300,000 slaves lived under the domination of 30,000 whites –

only fourteen white casualties were reported; when in revolt after revolt we compare the massive and often indiscriminate reprisals of the civilised master class (the employment of terror) to the scale of violence of the slaves (and presently their descendants), at least one impression is that a very different and shared order of things existed among these brutally violated people. Why did Nat Turner, admittedly a violent man, spare poor whites? Why did Toussaint escort his absent master's family to safety before joining the slave revolution? Why was 'no white person killed in a slave rebellion in colonial Virginia'?[60] Why would Edmund Morgan and Gerald Mullin argue that slave brutality was directly related to acculturation, 'that the more slaves came to resemble the indigent freemen whom they displaced, the more dangerous they became'?[61] In every century it was the same. The people with Chilembwe in 1915 force-marched European women and children to the safety of colonist.settlement. And, in that tradition, in the 1930s James ambivalently found Dessalines wanting for his transgressions of the tradition. Dessalines was a military genius, yes. He was shrewd, cunning, but he was also a man whose hatred had to be kept 'in check'.[62]

There was violence, of course, but in this tradition it most often was turned inwards: the active against the passive, or, as was the case of the Nongquase of 1856, the community against its material aspect. This was not 'savagery' as the gentlemen-soldiers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European armies arrogantly reported to their beloved publics at home. Neither was it the 'fratricide' of Fanon's extended Freudianism. And only seldom was it the devouring 'revolutionary terror' of the 'international bourgeois democratic revolution' which Genovese's neo-marxism has led him to acknowledge.[63] This violence was not inspired by an external object, it was not understood as a part of an attack on a system, or an engagement with an abstraction of oppressive structures and relations. Rather, it was their Jonestown, our *Nongquase*: the renunciation of actual being for historical being; the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system which had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social or psychic senses. For them defeat or victory was an internal affair. Like those in the 1950s who took to the mountains and forests of Kenya to become the Land and Freedom Army, the material or 'objective' power of the enemy was irrelevant to their destinies. His machines which flung metal missiles, his vessels of smoke, gas, fire, disease, all were of lesser relevance than the integral totality of the people themselves. This was what Chilembwe meant when he entreated his people to 'strike a blow and die'. This is what all the Jakobos in all the thousands of Chishawashas and at all the tens of thousands of beer-parties which dot the black world have been saying for tens of generations: 'We had only ourselves to blame for defeat.'[64] This was a revolutionary consciousness which proceeded

from the whole historical experience of black people and not merely from the social formations of capitalist slavery or the relations of production of colonialism.

Cabral, I believe, has made this point in the obverse when he asserted that 'it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement'.[65] If he, and Morgan, and Mullin and Genovese (by sheer accident I assure you) are correct, then it is quite possible that massive black violence is largely an artefact of westernisation. I suspect that it would appear among those blacks most deeply implicated in the institutions and cultures of the West. Our soldier/presidents-for-life who mark the national landscapes of modern Africa would seem to confirm this. Our black intellectuals in power seem frequently to be just as pathological. At Oxford, at Harvard, at the Sorbonne and their satellites, they have ingested sets of rules with cataclysmic consequences. They knife though our lives making the choices of madmen and specialists.

In one sense, of course, they are the heirs of the nineteenth century. Still, their inheritance is the unnatural one. There is a more natural legacy in that century, one of which I hope I have given you some indication.

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particular tradition of inquiry to employ them as such, strictly, to divulge the nature of the relationship between blacks (labour) and capitalism (mode of production). Here, however, the intention is not a reductionist one but an attempt to demonstrate in the simplest terms.

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30 Antonio Vazquez de Espinosa, author of *Compendium and Description of the West Indies* (Washington DC, 1942), recounts some of the measures used by Spanish colonists to delay the loss of Indian labour to their enterprises: '...although the Royal Council of the Indies ... has tried to remedy this evil with warrants and the amelioration of this great hardship and enslavement of the Indians, and the Viceroy of New Spain appoints mill inspectors ... since most of those who set out on such commissions, aim rather at their own enrichment ... and since the mill owners pay them well, they leave the wretched Indians in the same slavery ... the mill owners keep places provided in the mills in which they hide the wretched Indians against their will, so that they do not see or find them, and the poor fellows cannot complain about their wrongs.' (p.134)
31 Davidson, op. cit., p.237.
32 Boyd-Bowman, op. cit., p.134.
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34 Rout, op. cit., p.101.
35 Davidson, op. cit., p.244.

36 Ibid., pp.245-6.
37 William Taylor, 'The foundation of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Amapa', *The Americas* (Vol. XXVI, no.4, April 1970), pp.441-6.
38 As an indication of how fleeting is certainty, Davidson in 1966 was willing to argue that San Lorenzo de los Negros had been the only such settlement: 'Yanga's maroon movement is a notable incident in the history of Negroes in Mexico — the only known example of a fully successful attempt by slaves to secure their freedom en masse by revolt and negotiation and to have it sanctioned and guaranteed in law.' (Davidson, op. cit., p.259) Only four years later, Taylor (op. cit.) had published his discovery of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Amapa. And Vazquez de Espinosa, writing contemporaneously to the foundation of San Lorenzo, described a 'village of free Negro and mulattoes' in the nearby district of Guatemala (op. cit., p.224).
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44 Ennes, op. cit., p.213.
45 Ibid., pp.209-10.
46 Ibid., p.211. Some measures of the morality to which Ennes refers with approval are the sentiments expressed by Colonel Domingos Jorge Velho while justifying his impressment of Indian natives into his army: '...we augment our troops, and with them we carry war to those obstinate ones who refuse to give up; and if afterwards we avail ourselves of them for our plowing, we do them no injustice, because it is that we may sustain them and also their children no less than ourselves and ours; and so far is this from enslaving them that it rather does them an inestimable favour in that it teaches them to plow, plant, reap and labour for their own support — a thing which, before the whites teach it to them, they do not know how to do.' (p.207)
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eons until the white laws and commerce and customs will rot in the deserts they've created, lie bleached. *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos* will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain.

6

Tlilli, Tlapalli

The Path of the Red and Black Ink

"Out of poverty, poetry;
out of suffering, song."
—a Mexican saying

When I was seven, eight, nine, fifteen, sixteen years old, I would read in bed with a flashlight under the covers, hiding my self-imposed insomnia from my mother. I preferred the world of the imagination to the death of sleep. My sister, Hilda, who slept in the same bed with me, would threaten to tell my mother unless I told her a story.

I was familiar with *cuentos*—my grandmother told stories like the one about her getting on top of the roof while down below rabid coyotes were ravaging the place and wanting to get at her. My father told stories about a phantom giant dog that appeared out of nowhere and sped along the side of the pickup no matter how fast he was driving.

Nudge a Mexican and she or he will break out with a story. So, huddling under the covers, I made up stories for my sister night after night. After a while she wanted two stories per night. I learned to give her installments, building up the suspense with convoluted complications until the story climaxed several nights later. It must have been then that I decided to put stories on paper. It must have been then that working with images and writing became connected to night.

Invoking Art

In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined. Before the Conquest, poets gathered to play music, dance, sing and read poetry in open-air places around the *Xochicuahuitl, el Árbol Florido*, Tree-in-Flower. (The *Coaxihuitl* or morning glory is called the snake plant and its seeds, known as *ololiuhqui*, are hallucinogenic.[1]) The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman.

In looking at this book that I'm almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with the deep structure, the underlying structure, with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth. I can see the deep structure, the scaffolding. If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches. The problem is that the bones often do not exist prior to the flesh, but are shaped after a vague and broad shadow of its form is discerned or uncovered during beginning, middle and final stages of the writing. Numerous overlays of paint, rough surfaces, smooth surfaces make me realize I am preoccupied with texture as well. Too, I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other "objects" and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit. This almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will. It is a rebellious, willful entity, a precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur,

twigs, clay. My child, but not for much longer. This female being is angry, sad, joyful, is *Coatlicue*, dove, horse, serpent, cactus. Though it is a flawed thing—a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing—for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me.

I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer—an affirmation and a voicing of intent. Then I run water, wash the dishes or my underthings, take a bath, or mop the kitchen floor. This "induction" period sometimes takes a few minutes, sometimes hours. But always I go against a resistance. Something in me does not want to do this writing. Yet once I'm immersed in it, I can go fifteen to seventeen hours in one sitting and I don't want to leave it.

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be "fed," *la tengo que bañar y vestir.*

When invoked in rite, the object/event is "present;" that is, "enacted," it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it. It is metaphysical in that it "spins its energies between gods and humans" and its task is to move the gods. This type of work dedicates itself to managing the universe and its energies. I'm not sure what it is when it is at rest (not in performance). It may or may not be a "work" then. A mask may only have the power of presence during a ritual dance and the rest of the time it may merely be a "thing." Some works exist forever invoked, always in performance. I'm thinking of totem poles, cave paintings. Invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life. It is dedicated to the validation of humans; that is, it makes people hopeful, happy, secure, and it can have negative effects as well, which propel one towards a search for validation.[2]

The aesthetic of virtuosity, art typical of Western European cultures, attempts to manage the energies of its own internal system such as conflicts, harmonies, resolutions and balances. It

bears the presences of qualities and internal meanings. It is dedicated to the validation of itself. Its task is to move humans by means of achieving mastery in content, technique, feeling. Western art is always whole and always "in power." It is individual (not communal). It is "psychological" in that it spins its energies between itself and its witness.[3]

Western cultures behave differently toward works of art than do tribal cultures. The "sacrifices" Western cultures make are in housing their art works in the best structures designed by the best architects; and in servicing them with insurance, guards to protect them, conservators to maintain them, specialists to mount and display them, and the educated and upper classes to "view" them. Tribal cultures keep art works in honored and sacred places in the home and elsewhere. They attend them by making sacrifices of blood (goat or chicken), libations of wine. They bathe, feed, and clothe them. The works are treated not just as objects, but also as persons. The "witness" is a participant in the enactment of the work in a ritual, and not a member of the privileged classes.[4]

Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics. An Indian mask in an American museum is transposed into an alien aesthetic system where what is missing is the presence of power invoked through performance ritual. It has become a conquered thing, a dead "thing" separated from nature and, therefore, its power.

Modern Western painters have "borrowed," copied, or otherwise extrapolated the art of tribal cultures and called it cubism, surrealism, symbolism. The music, the beat of the drum, the Blacks' jive talk. All taken over. Whites, along with a good number of our own people, have cut themselves off from their spiritual roots, and they take our spiritual art objects in an unconscious attempt to get them back. If they're going to do it, I'd like them to be aware of what they are doing and to go about doing it the right way. Let's all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent. White America has only attended to the body of the earth in order to exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it. Instead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way. By taking up

curanderismo, Santeria, shamanism, Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people, Anglos would perhaps lose the white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathrooms, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases. Though in the conscious mind, black and dark may be associated with death, evil and destruction, in the subconscious mind and in our dreams, white is associated with disease, death and hopelessness. Let us hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of "primitiveness," can divert the indifferent, right-handed, "rational" suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond.

Ni cuicani: I, the Singer

For the ancient Aztecs, *tlilli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de sus códices* (the black and red ink painted on codices) were the colors symbolizing *escritura y sabiduría* (writing and wisdom).[5] They believed that through metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth, communication with the Divine could be attained, and *topan* (that which is above—the gods and spirit world) could be bridged with *mictlán* (that which is below—the underworld and the region of the dead).

> Poet: she pours water from the mouth of the pump, lowers the handle then lifts it, lowers, lifts. Her hands begin to feel the pull from the entrails, the live animal resisting. A sigh rises up from the depths, the handle becomes a wild thing in her hands, the cold sweet water gushes out, splashing her face, the shock of nightlight filling the bucket.

An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness.

The Shamanic State

When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I "trance." I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is my job, my calling, to traffic

in images. Some of these film-like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten. When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I *do* write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy.

To facilitate the "movies" with soundtracks, I need to be alone, or in a sensory-deprived state. I plug up my ears with wax, put on my black cloth eye-shades, lie horizontal and unmoving, in a state between sleeping and waking, mind and body locked into my fantasy. I am held prisoner by it. My body is experiencing events. In the beginning it is like being in a movie theater, as pure spectator. Gradually I become so engrossed with the activities, the conversations, that I become a participant in the drama. I have to struggle to "disengage" or escape from my "animated story," I have to get some sleep so I can write tomorrow. Yet I am gripped by a story which won't let me go. Outside the frame, I am film director, screenwriter, camera operator. Inside the frame, I am the actors—male and female—I am desert sand, mountain, I am dog, mosquito. I can sustain a four- to six-hour "movie." Once I am up, I can sustain several "shorts" of anywhere between five and thirty minutes. Usually these "narratives" are the offspring of stories acted out in my head during periods of sensory deprivation.

My "awakened dreams" are about shifts. Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts: one person metamorphoses into another in a world where people fly through the air, heal from mortal wounds. I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self and *el espíritu del mundo*. I change myself, I change the world.

Sometimes I put the imagination to a more rare use. I choose words, images, and body sensations and animate them to impress them on my consciousness, thereby making changes in my belief system and reprogramming my consciousness. This involves looking my inner demons in the face, then deciding which I want in my psyche. Those I don't want, I starve; I feed them no words, no images, no feelings. I spend no time with them, share not my

home with them. Neglected, they leave. This is harder to do than to merely generate "stories." I can only sustain this activity for a few minutes.

I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. The word, the image and the feeling have a palatable energy, a kind of power. *Con imagenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro. Con palabras me hago piedra, pájaro, puente de serpientes arrastrando a ras del suelo todo lo que soy, todo lo que algún día seré.*

Los que están mirando (leyendo),
los que cuentan (o refieren lo que leen).
Los que vuelven ruidosamente las hojas de los códices.
Los que tienen en su poder
la tinta negra y roja (la sabiduría)
y lo pintado,
ellos nos llevan, nos guían,
nos dicen el camino.[6]

Writing Is A Sensuous Act

Tallo mi cuerpo como si estuviera lavando un trapo. Toco las saltadas venas de mis manos, mis chichis adormecidas como pájaras a la anochecer. Estoy encorbada sobre la cama. Las imagenes aleteán alrededor de mi cama como murciélagos, la sábana como que tuviese alas. El ruido de los trenes subterráneos en mi sentido como conchas. Parece que las paredes del cuarto se me arriman cada vez más cerquita.

Picking out images from my soul's eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hand.

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre.* I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and

the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle.

Something To Do With the Dark

Quien canta, sus males espanta.
—un dicho

The toad comes out of its hiding place inside the lobes of my brain. It's going to happen again. The ghost of the toad that betrayed me—I hold it in my hand. The toad is sipping the strength from my veins, it is sucking my pale heart. I am a dried serpent skin, wind scuttling me across the hard ground, pieces of me scattered over the countryside. And there in the dark I meet the crippled spider crawling in the gutter, the day-old newspaper fluttering in the dirty rain water.

Musa bruja, venga. Cubrese con una sábana y espante mis demonios que a rempujones y a cachetadas me roban la pluma me rompen el sueño. Musa, ¡misericordia!

Óigame, musa bruja. ¿Porqué huye uste' en mi cara? Su grito me desarrolla de mi caracola, me sacude el alma. Vieja, quítese de aquí con sus alas de navaja. Ya no me despedaze mi cara. Vaya con sus pinche uñas que me desgarran de los ojos hasta los talones. Váyese a la tiznada. Que no me coman, le digo. Que no me coman sus nueve dedos caníbales.

Hija negra de la noche, carnala, ¿Porqué me sacas las tripas, porqué cardas mis entrañas? Este hilvanando palabras con tripas me está matando. Jija de la noche ¡vete a la chingada!

Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen.

Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it. When it begins to fester I have to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it. I get deep down into the place where it's rooted in my skin and pluck away at it, playing it like a musical instrument—the fingers pressing, making the pain worse before it can get better. Then out it comes. No more discomfort, no more ambivalence. Until another needle pierces the skin. That's what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be.

My flowers shall not cease to live;
my songs shall never end:
I, a singer, intone them;
they become scattered, they are spread about.
—Cantares mexicanos

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can communicate with images and words and that I can do it well. A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa—I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one.

When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else.

In *Xóchilt* in *Cuícatl* [7]

She writes while other people sleep. Something is trying to come out. She fights the words, pushes them down, down, a woman with morning sickness in the middle of the night. How much easier it would be to carry a baby for nine months and then expel it permanently. These continu-

ous multiple pregnancies are going to kill her. She is the battlefield for the pitched fight between the inner image and the words trying to recreate it. *La musa bruja* has no manners. Doesn't she know, nights are for sleeping?

She is getting too close to the mouth of the abyss. She is teetering on the edge, trying to balance while she makes up her mind whether to jump in or to find a safer way down. That's why she makes herself sick—to postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask.

To be a mouth—the cost is too high—her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth. *Todo pasaba por esa boca, el viento, el fuego, los mares y la Tierra.* Her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing through it. She wants to install 'stop' and 'go' signal lights, instigate a curfew, police Poetry. But something wants to come out.

Blocks (*Coatlicue* states) are related to my cultural identity. The painful periods of confusion that I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process: cultural shifts. The stress of living with cultural ambiguity both compels me to write and blocks me. It isn't until I'm almost at the end of the blocked state that I remember and recognize it for what it is. As soon as this happens, the piercing light of awareness melts the block and I accept the deep and the darkness and I hear one of my voices saying, "I am tired of fighting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall. On this night of the hearing of faults, *Tlazolteotl, diosa de la cara negra*, let fall the cockroaches that live in my hair, the rats that nestle in my skull. Gouge out my lame eyes, rout my demon from its nocturnal cave. Set torch to the tiger that stalks me. Loosen the dead faces gnawing my cheekbones. I am tired of resisting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall."

And in descending to the depths I realize that down is up, and I rise up from and into the deep. And once again I recognize that the internal tension of oppositions can propel (if it doesn't tear apart) the mestiza writer out of the *metate* where she is being ground with corn and water, eject her out as *nahual*, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial

energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human.

I sit here before my computer, *Amiguita*, my altar on top of the monitor with the *Virgen de Coatlalopeuh* candle and copal incense burning. My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body. The Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. This vampire which is my talent does not suffer other suitors.[9] Daily I court it, offer my neck to its teeth. This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, are my offerings, are my Aztecan blood sacrifices.

6

Essentialism and Experience

Individual black women engaged in feminist movement, writing feminist theory, have persisted in our efforts to deconstruct the category "woman" and argued that gender is not the sole determinant of woman's identity. That this effort has succeeded can be measured not only by the extent to which feminist scholars have confronted questions of race and racism but by the emerging scholarship that looks at the intertwining of race and gender. Often it is forgotten that the hope was not simply that feminist scholars and activists would focus on race and gender but that they would do so in a manner that would not reinscribe conventional oppressive hierarchies. Particularly, it was seen as crucial to building mass-based feminist movement that theory would not be written in a manner that would further erase and exclude black women and women of color, or, worse yet, include us in subordinate positions. Unfortunately, much feminist scholarship dashes these hopes, largely because critics fail to interrogate the location from which they speak, often assuming, as it is now fashionable to do, that there is no

need to question whether the perspective from which they write is informed by racist and sexist thinking, specifically as feminists perceive black women and women of color.

I was particularly reminded of this problem within feminist scholarship focusing on race and gender while reading Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference.* Intrigued by Fuss's discussion of current debates about essentialism and her problematizing of the issue, I was intellectually excited. Throughout much of the book she offers a brilliant analysis that allows critics to consider the positive possibilities of essentialism, even as she raises relevant critiques of its limitations. In my writing on the subject ("The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," "Post-Modern Blackness" in *Yearning*), though not as specifically focused on essentialism as the Fuss discussion, I concentrate on the ways critiques of essentialism have usefully deconstructed the idea of a monolithic homogenous black identity and experience. I also discuss the way a totalizing critique of "subjectivity, essence, identity" can seem very threatening to marginalized groups, for whom it has been an active gesture of political resistance to name one's identity as part of a struggle to challenge domination. *Essentially Speaking* provided me with a critical framework that added to my understanding of essentialism, yet halfway through the Fuss book I began to feel dismayed.

That dismay began with my reading of "'Race' under Erasure? Poststructuralist Afro-American Literary Theory." Here, Fuss makes sweeping statements about African American literary criticism without offering any sense of the body of work she draws on to make her conclusions. Her pronouncements about the work of black feminist critics are particularly disturbing. Fuss asserts, "With the exception of the recent work of Hazel Carby and Hortense Spillers, black feminist critics have been reluctant to renounce essentialist critical positions and humanist literary practices." Curious to know what works would lend

themselves to this assessment, I was stunned to see Fuss cite only essays by Barbara Christian, Joyce Joyce, and Barbara Smith. While these individuals all do valuable literary criticism, they certainly do not represent all black feminist critics, particularly literary critics. Summing up her perspectives on black feminist writing in a few paragraphs, Fuss concentrates on black male literary critics Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, citing a significant body of their writings. It seems as though a racialized gender hierarchy is established in this chapter wherein the writing on "race" by black men is deemed worthier of in-depth study than the work of black women critics.

Her one-sentence dismissal and devaluation of work by most black feminist critics raises problematic questions. Since Fuss does not wish to examine work by black feminist critics comprehensively, it is difficult to grasp the intellectual groundwork forming the basis of her critique. Her comments on black feminist critics seem like additions to a critique that did not really start off including this work in its analysis. And as her reasons are not made explicit, I wonder why she needed to invoke the work of black feminist critics, and why she used it to place the work of Spillers and Carby in opposition to the writing of other black feminist critics. Writing from her perspective as a British black person from a West Indian background, Carby is by no means the first or only black woman critic, as Fuss suggests, to compel "us to interrogate the essentialism of traditional feminist historiography which posits a universalizing and hegemonizing notion of global sisterhood." If Carby's work is more convincing to Fuss than other writing by black feminists she has read (if indeed she has read a wide range of black feminist work; nothing in her comments or bibliography suggests that she has), she could have affirmed that appreciation without denigrating other black feminist critics. This cavalier treatment reminds me of the way the tokenism of black women in feminist scholarship and professional encounters takes on

dehumanizing forms. Black women are treated as though we are a box of chocolates presented to individual white women for their eating pleasure, so that they can decide for themselves and others which pieces are most tasty.

Ironically, even though Fuss praises the work of Carby and Spillers, it is not their work that is given extensive critical reading in this chapter. Indeed, she treats black women's subjectivity as a secondary issue. Such scholarship is permissible in an academic context that consistently marginalizes black women critics. I am always amazed by the complete absence of references to work by black women in contemporary critical works claiming to address in an inclusive way issues of gender, race, feminism, postcolonialism, and so on. Confronting colleagues about such absences, I, along with other black women critics, am often told that they were simply unaware that such material exists, that they were often working from their knowledge of available sources. Reading *Essentially Speaking*, I assumed Diana Fuss is either unfamiliar with the growing body of work by black feminist critics—particularly literary criticism—or that she excludes that work because she considers it unimportant. Clearly, she bases her assessment on the work she knows, rooting her analysis in experience. In the concluding chapter to her book, Fuss particularly criticizes using experience in the classroom as a base from which to espouse totalizing truths. Many of the limitations she points out could be easily applied to the way experience informs not only what we write about, but how we write about it, the judgments we make.

More than any other chapter in *Essentially Speaking*, this concluding essay is profoundly disturbing. It also undermines Fuss' previous insightful discussion of essentialism. Just as my experience of critical writing by black feminist thinkers would lead me to make different and certainly more complex assessments from those Fuss makes, my response to the chapter "Essentialism in the Classroom" is to some extent informed by

my different pedagogical experiences. This chapter provided me with a text I could engage dialectically; it served as a catalyst for clarifying my thoughts on essentialism in the classroom.

According to Fuss, issues of "essence, identity, and experience" erupt in the classroom primarily because of the critical input from marginalized groups. Throughout her chapter, whenever she offers an example of individuals who use essentialist standpoints to dominate discussion, to silence others via their invocation of the "authority of experience," they are members of groups who historically have been and are oppressed and exploited in this society. Fuss does not address how systems of domination already at work in the academy and the classroom silence the voices of individuals from marginalized groups and give space only when on the basis of experience it is demanded. She does not suggest that the very discursive practices that allow for the assertion of the "authority of experience" have already been determined by a politics of race, sex, and class domination. Fuss does not aggressively suggest that dominant groups—men, white people, heterosexuals—perpetuate essentialism. In her narrative it is always a marginal "other" who is essentialist. Yet the politics of essentialist exclusion as a means of asserting presence, identity, is a cultural practice that does not emerge solely from marginalized groups. And when those groups do employ essentialism as a way to dominate in institutional settings, they are often imitating paradigms for asserting subjectivity that are part of the controlling apparatus in structures of domination. Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion. The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this "authority" without their having to name the desire for it. They do not attend class

and say, "I think that I am superior intellectually to my classmates because I am white and male and that my experiences are much more important than any other group's." And yet their behavior often announces this way of thinking about identity, essence, subjectivity.

Why does Fuss's chapter ignore the subtle and overt ways essentialism is expressed from a location of privilege? Why does she primarily critique the misuses of essentialism by centering her analysis on marginalized groups? Doing so makes them the culprits for disrupting the classroom and making it an "unsafe" place. Is this not a conventional way the colonizer speaks of the colonized, the oppressor of the oppressed? Fuss asserts, "Problems often begin in the classroom when those 'in the know' commerce only with others 'in the know,' excluding and marginalizing those perceived to be outside the magic circle." This observation, which could certainly apply to any group, prefaces a focus on critical commentary by Edward Said that reinforces her critique of the dangers of essentialism. He appears in the text as resident "Third World authority" legitimating her argument. Critically echoing Said, Fuss comments: "For Said it is both dangerous and misleading to base an identity politics upon rigid theories of exclusions, 'exclusions that stipulate, for instance, only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience.'" I agree with Said's critique, but I reiterate that while I, too, critique the use of essentialism and identity politics as a strategy for exclusion or domination, I am suspicious when theories call this practice harmful as a way of suggesting that it is a strategy only marginalized groups employ. My suspicion is rooted in the awareness that a critique of essentialism that challenges only marginalized groups to interrogate their use of identity politics or an essentialist standpoint as a means of exerting coercive power leaves unquestioned the critical practices of other

groups who employ the same strategies in different ways and whose exclusionary behavior may be firmly buttressed by institutionalized structures of domination that do not critique or check it. At the same time, I am concerned that critiques of identity politics not serve as the new, chic way to silence students from marginal groups.

Fuss makes the point that "the artificial boundary between insider and outsider necessarily contains rather than disseminates knowledge." While I share this perception, I am disturbed that she never acknowledges that racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins. There is rarely any need for marginalized groups to bring this binary opposition into the classroom because it is usually already operating. They may simply use it in the service of their concerns. Looked at from a sympathetic standpoint, the assertion of an excluding essentialism on the part of students from marginalized groups can be a strategic response to domination and to colonization, a survival strategy that may indeed inhibit discussion even as it rescues those students from negation. Fuss argues that "it is the unspoken law of the classroom not to trust those who cannot cite experience as the indisputable grounds of their knowledge. Such unwritten laws pose perhaps the most serious threat to classroom dynamics in that they breed suspicion amongst those inside the circle and guilt (sometimes anger) amongst those outside the circle." Yet she does not discuss who makes these laws, who determines classroom dynamics. Does she perhaps assert her authority in a manner that unwittingly sets up a competitive dynamic by suggesting that the classroom *belongs* more to the professor than to the students, to some students more than others?

As a teacher, I recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices

have been neither heard nor welcomed, whether these students discuss facts—those which any of us might know—or personal experience. My pedagogy has been shaped to respond to this reality. If I do not wish to see these students use the "authority of experience" as a means of asserting voice, I can circumvent this possible misuse of power by bringing to the classroom pedagogical strategies that affirm their presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics. This pedagogical strategy is rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experiential knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience. If experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence. When I teach Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in introductory courses on black women writers, I assign students to write an autobiographical paragraph about an early racial memory. Each person reads that paragraph aloud to the class. Our collective listening to one another affirms the value and uniqueness of each voice. This exercise highlights experience without privileging the voices of students from any particular group. It helps create a communal awareness of the diversity of our experiences and provides a limited sense of the experiences that may inform how we think and what we say. Since this exercise makes the classroom a space where experience is valued, not negated or deemed meaningless, students seem less inclined to make the telling of experience that site where they compete for voice, if indeed such a competition is taking place. In our classroom, students do not usually feel the need to compete because the concept of a privileged voice of authority is deconstructed by our collective critical practice.

In the chapter "Essentialism in the Classroom" Fuss centers her discussion on locating a particular voice of authority. Here it is her voice. When she raises the question "how are we to han-

dle" students, her use of the word "handle" suggests images of manipulation. And her use of a collective "we" implies a sense of a unified pedagogical practice shared by other professors. In the institutions where I have taught, the prevailing pedagogical model is authoritarian, hierarchical in a coercive and often dominating way, and certainly one where the voice of the professor is the "privileged" transmitter of knowledge. Usually these professors devalue including personal experience in classroom discussion. Fuss admits to being wary of attempts to censor the telling of personal histories in the classroom on the basis that they have not been "adequately 'theorized'," but she indicates throughout this chapter that on a fundamental level she does not believe that the sharing of personal experience can be a meaningful addition to classroom discussions. If this bias informs her pedagogy, it is not surprising that invocations of experience are used aggressively to assert a privileged way of knowing, whether against her or other students. If a professor's pedagogy is not liberatory, then students will probably not compete for value and voice in the classroom. That essentialist standpoints are used competitively does not mean that the taking of those positions creates the situation of conflict.

Fuss's experiences in the classroom may reflect the way in which "competition for voice" is an integral part of her pedagogical practice. Most of the comments and observations she makes about essentialism in the classroom are based on her experience (and perhaps that of her colleagues, though this is not explicit). Based on that experience she can confidently assert that she "remain[s] convinced that appeals to the authority of experience rarely advance discussion and frequently provoke confusion." To emphasize this point further she says, "I am always struck by the way in which introjections of experiential truths into classroom debates dead-end the discussion." Fuss draws on her particular experience to make totalizing generalizations. Like her, I have seen the way essentialist stand-

points can be used to silence or assert authority over the opposition, but I most often see and experience the way the telling of personal experience is incorporated into classrooms in ways that deepen discussion. And I am most thrilled when the telling of experience links discussions of facts or more abstract constructs to concrete reality. My experience in the classroom may be different from Fuss's because I speak as an institutionally marginalized other, and here I do not mean to assume an essentialist position. There are many black women professors who would not claim this location. The majority of students who enter our classrooms have never been taught by black women professors. My pedagogy is informed by this knowledge, because I know from experience that this unfamiliarity can overdetermine what takes place in the classroom. Also, knowing from personal experience as a student in predominantly white institutions how easy it is to feel shut out or closed down, I am particularly eager to help create a learning process in the classroom that engages everyone. Therefore, biases imposed by essentialist standpoints or identity politics, alongside those perspectives that insist that experience has no place in the classroom (both stances can create an atmosphere of coercion and exclusion), must be interrogated by pedagogical practices. Pedagogical strategies can determine the extent to which all students learn to engage more fully the ideas and issues that seem to have no direct relation to their experience.

Fuss does not suggest that teachers who are aware of the multiple ways essentialist standpoints can be used to shut down discussion can construct a pedagogy that critically intervenes before one group attempts to silence another. Professors, especially those from dominant groups, may themselves employ essentialist notions to constrain the voices of particular students; hence we must all be ever-vigilant in our pedagogical practices. Whenever students share with me the sense that my pedagogical practices are silencing them, I have to examine

that process critically. Even though Fuss grudgingly acknowledges that the telling of experience in the classroom may have some positive implications, her admission is quite patronizing:

> while truth clearly does not equate with experience, it cannot be denied that it is precisely the fiction that they are the same which prompts many students, who would not perhaps speak otherwise, to enter energetically into those debates they perceive as pertaining directly to them. The authority of experience, in other words, not only works to silence students, it also works to empower them. How are we to negotiate the gap between the conservative fiction of experience as the ground of all truth-knowledge and the immense power of this fiction to enable and encourage student participation?

All students, not just those from marginalized groups, seem more eager to enter energetically into classroom discussion when they perceive it as pertaining directly to them (when nonwhite students talk in class only when they feel connected via experience it is not aberrant behavior). Students may be well versed in a particular subject and yet be more inclined to speak confidently if that subject directly relates to their experience. Again, it must be remembered that there are students who may not feel the need to acknowledge that their enthusiastic participation is sparked by the connection of that discussion to personal experience.

In the introductory paragraph to "Essentialism in the Classroom" Fuss asks, "Exactly what counts as 'experience,' and should we defer to it in pedagogical situations?" Framing the question in this way makes it appear that comments about experiences necessarily disrupt the classroom, engaging the professor and students in a struggle for authority that can be mediated if the professor defers. This question, however, could be posed in a manner that would not imply a condescending

devaluation of experience. We might ask: How can professors and students who want to share personal experience in the classroom do so without promoting essentialist standpoints that exclude? Often when professors affirm the importance of experience students feel less need to insist that it is a privileged way of knowing. Henry Giroux, in his writing on critical pedagogy, suggests that "the notion of experience has to be situated within a theory of learning." Giroux suggests that professors must learn to respect the way students feel about their experiences as well as their need to speak about them in classroom settings: "You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions. feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it." Usually it is in a context where the experiential knowledge of students is being denied or negated that they may feel most determined to impress upon listeners both its value and its superiority to other ways of knowing.

Unlike Fuss, I have not been in classrooms where students find "empirical ways of knowing analytically suspect." I have taught feminist theory classes where students express rage against work that does not clarify its relationship to concrete experience, that does not engage feminist praxis in an intelligible way. Student frustration is directed against the inability of methodology, analysis, and abstract writing (usually blamed on the material and often justifiably so) to make the work connect to their efforts to live more fully, to transform society, to live a politics of feminism.

Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and mean-

ing to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process. Skeptically, Fuss asks, "Does experience of oppression confer special jurisdiction over the right to speak about that oppression?" This is a question that she does not answer. Were it posed to me by students in the classroom, I would ask them to consider whether there is any "special" knowledge to be acquired by hearing oppressed individuals speak from their experience—whether it be of victimization or resistance—that might make one want to create a privileged space for such discussion. Then we might explore ways individuals acquire knowledge about an experience they have not lived, asking ourselves what moral questions are raised when they speak for or about a reality that they do not know experientially, especially if they are speaking about an oppressed group. In classrooms that have been extremely diverse, where I have endeavored to teach material about exploited groups who are not black, I have suggested that if I bring to the class only analytical ways of knowing and someone else brings personal experience, I welcome that knowledge because it will enhance our learning. Also, I share with the class my conviction that if my knowledge is limited, and if someone else brings a combination of facts and experience, then I humble myself and respectfully learn from those who bring this great gift. I can do this without negating the position of authority professors have, since fundamentally I believe that combining the analytical and experiential is a richer way of knowing.

Years ago, I was thankful to discover the phrase "the authority of experience" in feminist writing because it gave me a name for what I brought to feminist classrooms that I thought was not present but believed was valuable. As an undergraduate in feminist classrooms where woman's experience was universalized, I knew from my experience as a black female that black

women's reality was being excluded. I spoke from that knowledge. There was no body of theory to invoke that would substantiate this truth claim. No one really wanted to hear about the deconstruction of woman as a category of analysis then. Insisting on the value of my experience was crucial to gaining a hearing. Certainly, the need to understand my experience motivated me as an undergraduate to write *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism.*

Now I am troubled by the term "authority of experience," acutely aware of the way it is used to silence and exclude. Yet I want to have a phrase that affirms the specialness of those ways of knowing rooted in experience. I know that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know. Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory. For example, I am disturbed when all the courses on black history or literature at some colleges and universities are taught solely by white people, not because I think that they cannot know these realities but that they know them differently. Truthfully, if I had been given the opportunity to study African American critical thought from a progressive black professor instead of the progressive white woman with whom I studied as a first-year student, I would have chosen the black person. Although I learned a great deal from this white woman professor, I sincerely believe that I would have learned even more from a progressive black professor, because this individual would have brought to the class that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing—that is, a privileged standpoint. It cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality. To me this privileged standpoint does not emerge from the "authority of experience" but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.

Often experience enters the classroom from the location of memory. Usually narratives of experience are told retrospectively. In the testimony of Guatemalan peasant and activist Rigoberta Menchú, I hear the passion of remembrance in her words:

> My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it's not only the men who suffer. Women must join the struggle in their own way. My mother's words told them that any evolution, any change, in which women had not participated, would not be change, and there would be no victory. She was as clear about this as if she were a woman with all sorts of theories and a lot of practice.

I know that I can take this knowledge and transmit the message of her words. Their meaning could be easily conveyed. What would be lost in the transmission is the spirit that orders those words, that testifies that, behind them—underneath, every where—there is a lived reality. When I use the phrase "passion of experience," it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering, for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know. In the classroom, I share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively. Sometimes, I tell students, it is like a recipe. I tell them to imagine we are baking bread that needs flour. And we have all the other ingredients but no flour. Suddenly, the flour becomes

most important even though it alone will not do. This is a way to think about experience in the classroom.

On another day, I might ask students to ponder what we want to make happen in the class, to name what we hope to know, what might be most useful. I ask them what standpoint is a personal experience. Then there are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountaintop and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountaintop is difficult to reach with all our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know.