

## Experience

L'ennui . . . c'est la jouissance vue de rives du désir

Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

It is an experience without qualities, this quotidian crisis of meaning, an infuriating, demoralizing, despairing confrontation with . . . with “the boring”? But others are not bored. Only my desire, or its failure, is revealed: Boredom isolates, individuates, even as it blurs the world gray. A confrontation with nothing, then, or Nothing, or something like it. Perhaps just a name for what cannot be named, an encounter with the limits of language. An experience without qualities, with the deficits of the self masquerading as the poverty of the world. In boredom there is no distinguishing in here from out there, for the world in its failure to engage collapses into an extension of the bored subject who empties out in the vain search for an interest, a pleasure, a meaning. Self and world collapse in a nihilistic affirmation that nothing means, nothing pleases, nothing matters.

Boredom is first of all this tangle of word and experience: a subject in crisis, a vacuous world, interchangeable losses. Yet ‘boredom’ names a stalemate recognizable even by those lucky ones whose desires do not collapse into meaninglessness. In a time when the drives to novelty and innovation, speed and progress that have always defined modernity have become the foundation of a process of continuously accelerating transformation, boredom haunts the Western world. It appears as both cause and effect of this universal process—both as the disaffection with the old that drives the search for change and as the malaise produced by living under a permanent speed-up. A symptom, then, of modernity, this experience without qualities, an ad-

<sup>1</sup>“Ennuï . . . is ecstasy glimpsed from the banks of desire.” *Le Plaisir du Texte*, 43. Unless otherwise noted, translations from French and German are my own.

stays put, to an era in which the idea of transcendent meaning seems hopelessly old-fashioned.

Boredom, psychoanalysis tells us, is a defense. A refusal to feel that protects a self threatened by its own fear or desire or need for what it seems to eschew. A means of stabilizing subjective existence without confronting the gaps between imagination and reality that render defense against feeling necessary. “Ecstasy glimpsed from the banks of desire” and simultaneously the “warm gray muffle lined with glowing silk” in which, according to Walter Benjamin, “we wrap ourselves when we dream.”<sup>2</sup> Therapy, which aims to help the subject enter the river of desire or, in Benjamin’s remarkable phrase, to turn out the lining of time, can make do with this definition of boredom as a subjective defense. Indeed, in any particular case of boredom, the diagnosis of affective resistance may be relevant. However, if we want to know not why so-and-so is bored or even what boredom does for people in general but why, to cite Benjamin again, “in the [eighteen-]forties boredom began to be felt on an epidemic scale” (165), a different model of interpretation is called for.

How did this experience without qualities infect entire populations? Benjamin is by no means alone in speaking of boredom as a disease afflicting modern subjects, and the “epidemic” has hardly abated since 1844, when Flaubert asked his friend Louis de Cormenin whether he knew “that modern boredom which gnaws at a man’s entrails and makes of an intelligent being a walking shadow, a thinking phantom.”<sup>3</sup> Surely the melange of pride and anxiety with which Flaubert represents this uncanny experience is an agency of transmission—for to admit that one does not suffer in this way, to write Flaubert that he is alone with his ennui, would doubtless be to turn oneself into the object of boredom. But can we really speak of a lineage that extends from the twenty-three year old budding novelist through figures such as Rimbaud, Breton, Hofmannsthal, and George to more contemporary avatars of cool such as James Dean, Lou Reed, Kurt Cobain? If boredom is a disease, then it is one in which contagion can be spread without direct contact—for the bored subject is generally found alone among unfeeling others (Emma in

<sup>2</sup>The locus classicus of the psychoanalytic approach is Otto Fenichel’s 1934 “Zur Psychologie der Langeweile,” which calls it “a state of instinctual tension with repressed aims” (271). Wanch expands on this idea in an essay that synthesizes the literature on “Boredom in Psychoanalytic Perspective”; Stern discusses therapeutic issues surrounding boredom from a more contemporary point of view. See Adam Phillips for an intriguing reading of boredom from an object relations perspective. Benjamin citations are from *Das Passagen-Werk*, 160.

<sup>3</sup>Letter of July 6 1844, *Correspondance I*, 208–9.

lessly, a form of affective resistance, against such companions. As the dreamer's comforting muffle, ennui transmutes despair at the foreclosure of desire, at the experience of oneself as "thinking phantom," into a stable configuration of the self. The boredom that spreads throughout European society in the course of the nineteenth century is thus less a new feeling than a new way of feeling—or more precisely, a form of reflective distance that becomes a new attitude toward experience altogether.

If we may trust the Oxford English Dictionary, boredom was literally nonexistent until the late eighteenth century—that is, it came into being as Enlightenment was giving way to Industrial Revolution. While its continental cousins "ennui" and "Langeweile" are older, they were not used synonymously, that is, in the modern sense that combines an existential and a temporal connotation, until about the same time. This linguistic convergence reflects experiential transformations that were transnational in nature, for modernization literally altered the quality of human being in time.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the nineteenth century, even as the temporal rhythms of everyday life were being revolutionized by technological and economic developments, a new, secular interpretation of human temporality was gaining ground. Faith in a coming redemption and in a divinely ordered eternity was increasingly being displaced by enlightened belief in human progress toward an earthly paradise; religious vocabularies of reflection on subjective existence were being eclipsed by a radically different language grounded in bodily materiality. The nineteenth-century discourse on boredom registers this epochal transformation in the rhetoric of reflection on human existence. In it, the impact of modernization on subjective experience was articulated, existential questions linked to a peculiarly modern experience of empty, meaningless time. As a discursively articulated phenomenon, then, boredom is at once objective and subjective, emotion and intellectualization—not just a response to the modern world but also an historically constituted strategy for coping with its discontents.

Boredom epitomizes the dilemma of the autonomous modern subject, for whom enlightenment has also meant fragmentation—for whom modernization and scientific progress have caused, in Max Weber's term, the "disenchantment" of the world such that history and religion can no longer anchor identity in the fabric of collective meaning. If rationality is the sus-

<sup>4</sup>Without asserting that the different words refer to a single experience (an implausible claim even within a single linguistic or national context), I shall therefore speak of 'the discourse on boredom' as a whole and will use the English term to refer to the phenomenon in general when the particular linguistic context is not essential.

alized skepticism, constitutes its existential reality. In line with Enlightenment, the bored subject rejects the everyday world yet finds in it (negative) metaphysical significance: the experience of boredom fosters a nihilistic dynamic that makes such disaffection seem a timeless feature of the human condition. But the moment of critical distance that inheres in boredom as a form of skepticism is undermined when it is universalized and naturalized in this way. Lived as a pseudo-religious revelation of the ultimate meaninglessness of existence, such ennui obscures its own historical specificity as a symptom of the particular losses that plague modern subjects. In thereby effacing the historicity of the crisis of meaning with which it is associated, boredom exemplifies the deterioration of Enlightenment into mythology.

“Modern boredom” undeniably resembles, echoes, and resonates with older forms of malaise—melancholy, acedia, *horror loci*, *taedium vitae*—stretching back to antiquity. However, it can be identified with none of them. The experience of malaise cannot simply be abstracted from the language in which it is expressed, for what appears as immediacy is in fact construction. Each of these forms of discontent is embedded in an historically and culturally specific way of understanding and interpreting human experience—in what I call a *rhetoric of reflection*. Thus the language of melancholy implies a deviance from the ideal of a homeostatic balance of humors in the body, that of acedia a loss of spiritual connection to the divine. And the boredom that is at once the bane of modern subjects and a homeopathic strategy for stabilizing identity in a world of constant transformation instantiates a recognizably and specifically modern way of thinking about human existence.

The experience without qualities is the plague of the enlightened subject, whose skeptical distance from the certainties of faith, tradition, sensation renders the immediacy of quotidian meaning hollow or inaccessible. If boredom gains sway over the language in which the human aspiration to meaning is formulated—and thus appears “epidemic”—in modernity, then because the rhetoric of reflection that gives rise to this negative configuration of self and world has been naturalized. It is in the terms of this rhetoric, in relation to a vision of human being as embodied, mortal, and defined by individual rational autonomy, that so much that is historically and culturally specific in modernity comes to be experienced as though it were proper to human existence as such.

The point, then, is not simply that boredom is an historically specific experience. Its pervasiveness in modern Western society has a larger significance, for it is the index of an historic paradigm shift in the rhetoric of re-

focuses of reflection rendered subjective through meaning by situating it in relation to religious or cultural metanarratives about human being, the language of boredom is secular, materialist, and resigned to the loss of meaning. The apparent reflective stability of the bored subject inheres in this resignation. But perhaps this stability is an illusion rather more like Vladimir's waiting for Godot, simultaneously "bored to death" and terrified lest the impoverished world suddenly vanish and leave him "alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!"<sup>5</sup> Stranded thus on the banks of desire, resigned to the loss of meaning and fearing worse, the modern subject brandishes boredom like an article of faith.

How, then, to interpret an experience through which the very possibility of meaning comes into question, in which the loneliness of the godforsaken subject is expressed as fate? To grasp the significance of boredom, I shall argue, it is necessary to think the relation between boredom as an experience of subjective crisis and boredom as an empirically conditioned social phenomenon. On one hand, to explicate the nihilistic dynamic of the experience not ontologically but historically, and on the other, to grasp its pervasiveness not sociologically but philosophically. It is necessary, in a word, to attend to the rhetoric of reflection, to the way of thinking about subjective experience boredom exemplifies. Even in its most quotidian manifestations, I contend, boredom embodies a specifically modern crisis of meaning. Developing a conception of the experience that reflects its historicity can therefore illuminate the human significance of the modernization process—and reveal how the dilemmas of modern subjectivity are imbricated with the vast cultural transformations of the West during the past two hundred years.

Historically speaking, it is the widespread assumption that boredom is a universal feature of the human condition that bears explanation, for in it, time is lived in a fashion proper to the modern world. On one hand, boredom is made possible by a form of human existence keyed to the precision of what Georg Simmel called the "supersubjective temporal schema" of clock time. And on the other, it depends on the modern conception of history as progress—it is internally linked to the ideal of human life itself as a process of incessant change and improvement. In boredom, both of these ways of experiencing time appear problematic—and interconnected. The moment lived as meaningless eternity undermines faith in the optimistic trajectory of the historical whole just as boredom with history—or with one's own life—as a series of senseless repetitions causes each moment to appear as a mean-

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Beckett, 52.

the human condition: “Under the heavy flakes of snowy years/Ennui, the fruit of dismal incuriosity,/Takes on the proportions of immortality.”<sup>6</sup>

My seemingly paradoxical claim, then, is that it is precisely *as an experience of modernity* that boredom appears timeless, the existential crisis associated with it universal.<sup>7</sup> While some people surely have always had moments of despairing conviction that the universe is darkly meaningless, the boredom that we know as occasioning such a sense of futility cannot simply be identified as a universal feature of the human condition. It is not only that as a post-Enlightenment entry into the vocabulary of subjective experience, modern boredom differs from its precursors in significant ways. To call an experience “modern” is to make philosophical as well as historical claims. In this case, it is to assert both that the relation between self and world found in boredom occurs in modernity and that it is an experience *of* modernity, a mode in which the historical particularity of the perception and the perceiving subject is revealed.<sup>8</sup>

However, boredom is an experience of modernity, of modern temporality, in which the conditions of possibility of experience become the conditions of its disappearance. The nihilistic dynamic through which boredom is lived as a timeless feature of the human condition expresses the paradoxical-

<sup>6</sup>“Rien n’égale en longueur les boîteuses journées/Quand sous les lourds flocons des neiges années/L’ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,/Prend les proportions de l’immortalité.”

<sup>7</sup>While in this study I shall not attempt to extend my historical claims for boredom to colonial or post-colonial contexts, anecdotal evidence indicates that the structures of experience with which I am concerned appear at the “periphery” as well as the “center” of the modernization process. Thus my focus on the European origin of the discourse on boredom should not be read as imputing an “occidental” character to the experience itself. Indeed, on my understanding, insofar as boredom is a function of a modernized temporality, the shift from traditional to mechanical time (as integrated, of course, in the processes of industrialization and in the associated rationalization of everyday life) will itself tend to produce boredom as a symptom of “modern subjectivity.” And since modernization in the colonial or post-colonial context is always also a process of discursive occupation and resignification of subjective experience, insofar as the agent of modernization speaks the language of boredom, we can expect very similar configurations of self-understanding to arise in colonial and post-colonial contexts. On the role of melancholy and boredom in nineteenth-century *colonizer* discourse, see Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900*.

<sup>8</sup>I am not claiming, of course, that the person who is bored *recognizes* the historicity of his or her experience. While one might propose, in a neo-Hegelian fashion, that the experience of boredom is in the fullest sense an experience of modernity only for those who know it as such, the absence of a reflective recognition *that* the experience is historically specific does not constitute counter-evidence for my more limited contention. The demonstration that boredom is a modern experience in both senses—historically limited to modernity and expressive of the modernity of the person experiencing it—depends on other sorts of evidence.

in the ending boredom is, then, how to grasp the historical particularity of a mode of experience that effaces its own historicity. Before discussing the strategy through which I propose to overcome the reflective impasse that characterizes the experience without qualities, it will be helpful to pause to reflect more broadly upon the modernity boredom exemplifies.

In recent years, the assumptions embedded in the concept of modernity have come to seem increasingly problematic. The notion that Western standards and experiences ought to provide a model for the rest of the world is no longer taken for granted. Historians, anthropologists, and cultural theorists of all stripes have emphasized the significance of local and national differences in the construction of the modern in different contexts, even within the so-called developed world. Nonetheless, discussions of modernity and modernization still tend to focus on historical transformations that are the stuff of metanarratives. On secularization, the separation of spheres, the rise of industrial production, on the emergence of nation-states and of the political institutions of representative citizenship that correspond to them. What Jean-François Lyotard famously dubbed the “obsolescence of the meta-narrative apparatus of legitimation”<sup>9</sup> notwithstanding, such categories and the theoretical suppositions embedded in them continue to shape a great deal of what goes on in the social sciences. Indeed, in the very globalized world that seems, to many, to exemplify this “post-modern” circumstance, such assumptions—most notably the notion that there are intrinsic relations between political and economic modernization—continue to have very real effects.

All of this attests to the enduring importance of teleological narratives that are bound up, seemingly inseparably, with the topoi of modernity and modernization. The ubiquity of these topoi both reflects and reinforces a way of thinking about history and human identity that has proved remarkably resilient since the Enlightenment. Indeed, the power of this paradigm is such that doubts about whether the technological, scientific, and social transformations associated with modernization constitute “progress” do not necessarily call the conceptual framework into question. Much of the most exciting work done in cultural and social history in the past generation has been directed toward opening up these categories—emphasizing the limits of secularization, rationalization, and democratization to rewrite the story of modernity in more ambiguous terms. But to underline the importance of the modern forms of consumption that emerged alongside modern forms of

<sup>9</sup>Lyotard 1984, xxiv.

toward modern democratic nation states is linked to a politics of the spectacle is not, in itself, to transcend the historical paradigm inherited from the Enlightenment.

There is, however, another sense of “modernity”—the modernity not of politics but of art, not of the historical epoch but of subjective experience. In this sense Charles Baudelaire, who is often, too generously, credited with coining the term “modernité,”<sup>10</sup> declared: “Almost all our originality comes from the stamp which *time* imprints on our impressions.”<sup>11</sup> Modernity, he wrote, is “the ephemeral [*transitoire*], the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable” (695/12). To posit the interest of modernity in this sense is quite a different matter from endorsing an evolutionary view of history since, as Baudelaire has it, “every old master has had his own modernity” (695/12). Here what is at stake in “modernity” is the historical particularity of aesthetic forms and of the modes of perception that correspond to them. It is manifest historically not in a progression but rather in a succession of different forms of art and life that embody the striving after the ever-new.

Of course, the idea that human existence is defined by such a striving for novelty is itself, historically speaking, a modern notion. The emphasis on the individual, the particular, the unique that for Baudelaire was the quintessence of modern art, is nearly as modern, historically speaking, as the Enlightenment stress on rationality. His modernité resonates with the historicist notion that human cultural existence consists of a succession of fundamentally different constellations—a conception that has its origins in romanticism. In Baudelaire’s case, this romantic idea does not lead, as for Herder or Hegel, to an evolutionary model of history. Instead, it is bound to a peculiarly modernist anti-historicism that elevates beauty over truth, feeling over reason, experience over abstract knowledge. If rationality is the measure of modernity in the socio-political sense, here it is aesthetic judgment.

What is at stake in the embrace of modernity not as idea but as experi-

<sup>10</sup>In fact the source seems to be Chateaubriand’s *Memoires*. See Jauss, “Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewußtsein der Modernität” in *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*.

<sup>11</sup>“Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” was first published in *Figaro* in 1863. It is reproduced in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* [OC] II, 683–724. English in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 1–41. The remark cited is on 696 in the French and 14 in the English text. Subsequent parenthetical citations give the French and then the English page numbers; I follow Mayne with modifications.



originality and novelty. It is the ability to give form to the new, to turn the transience of lived experience into the permanence of artistic form. If the first sense of modernity has its origins in Enlightenment ideas about science, the genealogy of the second may be traced to the seventeenth century *querelle des anciens et modernes*. Thus Baudelaire rejects the practice of imposing a “despotic form of perfection borrowed from the repertory of classical ideas” (696/14) upon the subjects to be represented and declares that “for any ‘modernity’ to be worthy of becoming ‘antiquity,’ it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it” (695/13). The modern artist “makes it his business to extract [*dégager*] from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (694/12).<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire is on the side of the moderns, but what is at stake for him is the very thing that led Aristotle to assert (*Poetics* 9, 1451b) that poetry is “more philosophical” than history—the fact that it speaks of things in general rather than as particulars, that art is concerned with the universal and the timeless rather than with the flux of socio-cultural and historical life.

According to Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire “experienced the old claim [*Anspruch*] to immortality as his entitlement [*Anspruch*] one day to be read as an ancient author.”<sup>13</sup> As Benjamin stresses, this wish came true with astonishing rapidity, for the world changed so quickly that “the distant future, the *époques lointaines*” of which the poet wrote arrived only a few decades after his death. Writing in the nineteen-thirties, Benjamin reflected: “Indeed Paris still stands; and the great tendencies of social development are still the same. But the more they have remained stable, the more fragile everything became that had stood under the sign of the ‘truly new’ in the experience of them. The modern has not in the least remained the same; and the ancient that is supposed to be contained in it yields in reality the image of the antiquated” (89). Benjamin’s great, unfinished attempt to excavate the interior history of modernity in the *Passagen-Werk* has taught us much about this historical dynamic, by which the sociocultural dimension of modernity continuously destroys, undermines, and leaves behind the very novelty of experience and ipso facto of artistic creation that it calls forth. In a world dominated by modernity in the first sense, there can be no antiquity, but only ob-

<sup>12</sup>Or, more literally: “extract [*dégager*] from fashion whatever element it may contain of the poetic within the historical, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (694/12).

<sup>13</sup>*Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, 80.

cess at grasping and transformation of the momentary into the enduring as a permanent feature of modern life.

In 1905, less than forty years after Baudelaire's death, a thinker whose influence on Benjamin should not be underestimated, Georg Simmel, linked the increasing importance of fashion in contemporary culture both to "the specifically 'impatient' tempo of modern life" and to the fact that "the great, lasting, unquestioned convictions are more and more losing their force."<sup>14</sup> Modern experience is conditioned by the continuous destruction of the historical, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic contexts that give human life meaning—by what Benjamin called the eclipse of *Erfahrung* in favor of punctual *Erlebnisse*. In modernity, experience is defined, so to speak, by its own disappearance. As a consequence, in the words of Robert Musil, "A world of qualities without a man has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them. . . . Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view . . . has finally arrived at the "I" itself, for the belief that the most important thing about experience is that one experiences it or of action that one does it, is beginning to strike most people as naïve."<sup>15</sup>

In boredom, the disappearance of experience is manifested in precisely such alienation from one's own doing and being: it is a quotidian crisis of subjectivity. By attending to both the socio-historical and the linguistic construction of this experience without qualities, I bring social scientific perspectives on the constitution of subjective experience into conversation with aesthetic and cultural understandings of what makes subjective experience modern. The object is to mediate between humanistic and social scientific rhetorics in a fashion that neither reduces questions of meaning to sociological epiphenomena nor treats them in abstraction from the historical and material contexts in which they arise. My strategy for articulating these modes of interpretation is contained, in a nutshell, in the claim that the experience without qualities is a symptom of the *democratization of skepticism in modernity*. This formulation points to dimensions of modern experience that neither Weber's 'disenchantment of the world' nor Nietzsche's 'nihilism' capture: 'democratization' for the positive or at least potentially positive dimension of the loss of epistemic and cultural frameworks in modernity and 'skepticism' for the incomplete way in which religious and other metanarratives have actually been overcome.

Although the questions of meaning associated with boredom are not new,

<sup>14</sup>Georg Simmel *Gesamtausgabe* [GSG], vol. 14, 197–98.

<sup>15</sup>*Gesammelte Werke*, vol. I, 150.