

Burnett
Punctum Exercise 9
(Sublime Historical Experience)

“Render your punctum as an experience. That is: make it available to a reader, viewer, listener, not as knowledge; not as narrative, nor argument; not as fact, nor information; but as...experience. You may use language, but bear in mind Ankersmit’s sense of the fundamental antagonism between language and experience.”

“So it will be the difficult but challenging future task of the historical theorist to liberate the history of historical experience from the heavy and oppressive weight of (the historian’s) language and to unearth experience from the thick sedimentary strata of language covering it.”

-F.R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 14

A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound.
The wrinkled roses tinkle, the paper ones,
And the ear is glass, in which the noises pelt,
The false roses – compare the silent rose of the sun
And rain, the blood-rose living in its smell,
With this paper, this dust. That states the point.

Messieurs,
It is an artificial world. The rose
Of paper is of the nature of its world.
The sea is so many written words; the sky
Is blue, clear, cloudy, high, dark, wide and round;
The mountains inscribe themselves upon the walls.
And, otherwise, the rainy rose belongs
To naked men, to women naked as rain.

Where is that summer warm enough to walk
Among the lascivious poisons, clean of them,
And in what covert may we, naked, be
Beyond the knowledge of nakedness, as part
Of reality, beyond the knowledge of what
Is real, part of a land beyond the mind?

-Wallace Stevens (the opening
of *Extracts from Addresses to the
Academy of Fine Ideas*)

Of the community, then, little can be said. It is possible that, in the years to come, new surfacings, or new bodies of evidence, will permit richer and better grounded speculation as to the theory and methods shared by those of the cult — assuming, of course, that the cult actually exists, or, perhaps more precisely *exists in some form admitting of access via the ordinary forensic instruments of inquiry*.

Pending such revelations we have only what we have: the tragic and fleeting specter of a nearly naked person in the throes of an as-yet-undefined psychic rupture; a few moments of ecstatic flailing upon the green; whispered words (urgent, conspiratorial, visionary, joyful, very likely mad); finally, sweet oblivion — the silence of the tomb.

So we have what we have, my dear colleagues — the words we heard as we leaned close, laying, each of us, an ear so close to those lips that even that faintest breath tickled the seldom touched skin that both shield and reveals our organs of audition.

In these brief remarks I will not endeavor a definitive collation of our fragmentary and diverse apprehensions. Better simply to sketch the most general précis of what has become our shared sense of what we were told.

And so, the associates of this occult sodality seem to work in a manner reminiscent of those fantastical nomadic bands invoked at the close of Bradbury's dystopian *Fahrenheit 451*. Which is to say, these “historians” (if that is what they are) seem to work in concert, and to share a vision that is simultaneously a form of life and a form of labor. In this conjunction one senses (or one *projects?*) a very definite sense of a clerisy — in that the vocation appears to be totalizing, accepted in the spirit of service through sacrificial devotion.

An asceticism so baroque as to be indistinguishable from the most extravagant sensuality is suspected. Yes, they appear to think of themselves as scholars, at least of a sort — though theirs is a species none of us in this academy would recognize. They appear wholly to disavow “knowledge” of the past in any form. And yet, it would seem that they conceive of their work as an absolute and uncompromising *dedication* to the past — through a form of “communion” or even “ecstasy” more akin to Sora shamanism than to the monographs we publish in our *Proceedings*. Unlike the Sora shamans, however, the sharers in this queer sodality do not speak for or take on the personhood of the dead. Instead, it would seem, each devotee dedicates him or herself to *a specific moment in the past*.

The precise nature of these “moments” remains unclear. Are they days? Years? Hours? The breathless ravings of our unique informant do not permit us any certainty on this matter. Some of us came away with a sense that, initially, those who pledged themselves to the earliest cohort of the community took on whatever historical moment they wished (of whatever duration or temporal form) — but as the secretive and passionate community grew, it seems greater formality was

introduced, and the time periods chosen by or assigned to initiates were standardized — initially at a year; but eventually, the cult proliferating, practitioners became increasingly exacting in their habits, and smaller and smaller units of time became the norm. In recent times, it would appear, even a single *day* could easily become the purview of a life's work.

What is clear, however, is that this phrase “life's work” does not capture the actual nature of the undertaking. For this was not simply the work of a life (a simple studious immersion in the historical minutiae of a given historical moment) but rather a *lifework*. One apparently lived *as* one's historical moment.

What might this mean? Of this, at present, we cannot say much. Whatever it might be, it is evidently beyond our present conception of the historians' craft. We do know, however, that the training was exigent in the extreme, and the commitment evidently *total*. The practitioner became, in effect, nameless, at the ultimate verge of the practice, with eyes bright in an understanding that has been likened to that of the fateful victim in Kafka's “Penal Colony,” who, cut through by the inscription of his crime, achieved a perfect henotic comprehension at the precise moment of expiration. The term “incarnation” may be applicable.

Now, over this grave, we bow our heads in a silent memorial to this strange meteor of the historical vocation — a brother we call him, though with some measure of uncertainty, even trepidation. And we acknowledge that we do not even know how properly to call this fallen star of historicism, which leans us to propose that his resting place may serve us as something like a “tomb of the unknown historian.” On his stone, as both name and epitaph, we have inscribed the final words that past his lips.

Fittingly, it was a date (quite probably his own):

6 August 1945