Escargotesque, or, What Is Experience

M.H.Bowker

Published by Punctum Books

M.H.Bowker.
Escargotesque, or, What Is Experience.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76480
PART 1: FORECASTS

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

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

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

bloody despot — in your ears, under your tongue: When you caravan to Burkina Faso in the Renault with no floorboards, your eyes go red, you cough red for days.
Above the pushy palms, the moon, which is the same moon over Paris, seems absolutely different, absolutely deadly, absolutely merciless.

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

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

§

Mouru Shabi Abraham, unemployed tailor and joint-occupant of the dilapidated *plein-air* schoolroom where you sleep, awaits your return from garbagecollecting to share a supper of corn meal and oil.
He draws on the blackboard a map of Benin like a dagger-cloud.


"Tu cherches quoi là-dedans?" [What do you seek in this?]

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

*Enfin*, no one feels understood.
You eat the bits of pork left in plantain leaves atop an old lead-acid battery, but they go down hard because of the child’s song at the beach:

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

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

“… Diarrhea! Diarrhea! Diarrhea! Now I’m dying!”
Like narrative, the digestive tract has a beginning, middle, and end.

§

Oh, you *are* sick.

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

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

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

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

“*Dieu te bénisse.*” [God bless.]

The suggestion of malaria burns you up. (Or is it fever?) Either way, he is right about the prayer:
You wake to Abraham supplicating an Evangelical Jesus: “Mathieu, Mathieu … Jeyhsoo, Jeyhsoo.”

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

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

There is pain and there is pain. Not everyone’s can be spectacular.
Instead, something within you has collapsed, silently, like a snail detached from its shell.

§

Søren Kierkegaard, in an 1841 sermon, asks:

Was there not a time also in your consciousness, my listener, when cheerfully and without a care you were glad with the glad, when you wept with those who wept, when the thought of God blended irrelevantly with your other conceptions, blended with your happiness but did not sanctify it, blended with your grief but did not comfort it? And later was there not a time when this in some sense guiltless life, which never called itself to account, vanished? ... Was there not a time when you
found no one to whom you could turn, when the darkness of quiet despair brooded over your soul, and you did not have the courage to let it go but would rather hang on to it and you even brooded once more over your despair? … Was there not a time when you felt that the world did not understand your grief, could not heal it, could not give you any peace, that this had to be in heaven, if heaven was anywhere to be found; alas it seemed to you that the distance between heaven and earth was infinite, and just as you yourself lost yourself in contemplating the immeasurable world, just so God had forgotten you and did not care about you? And in spite of all this, was there not a defiance in you that forbade you to humble yourself under God’s mighty hand? Was this not so? And what would you call this condition if you did not call it death, and how would you describe it except as darkness? (1980b, x–xi)

Pace Kierkegaard, we call this condition something other than death and darkness. We name it “experience,” which is not to say that experience must be agonizing, but that experience
is caught up with abandonment, “despair,” “defiance,” and “hang[ing] on,” although these entanglements are not always recognized.

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

Of course, for Kierkegaard, “the profound secret of innocence” is “that it is at the same time anxiety [angst]. Dreamily the spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself. … Anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility” (1980, 41–42). Innocence and inexperience entail the terror, the angst of possible experience. According to Kierkegaard, the “immeasurable” possibilities of experience coagulate into an “intimated nothing” that can only cause anxiety, since from this nothing there is no
escape or resolution: You cannot retreat from this possibility, nor the freedom and responsibility it implies (what Kierkegaard calls “being able”), once you conceive of it. Sartre’s phrase is: “L’homme est condamné a être libre” [We are condemned to be free] (1957, 23).

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

In the case of Adam, whom Kierkegaard wishes to re-insert into history, “the prohibition [‘Do not eat …’] induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom’s possibility” (1980, 44–45), implying that Adam can now either do or not do, obey or disobey, eat or not eat. Adam does not yet
know good or evil, but now he is a being and not merely an extension of God’s will, now he is able to do, and his ability is anxious.

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

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

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. … Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way.
If potential experience creates *angst*, what could be more ecstatic than to experience all possibilities as inconsequential, interchangeable, futile? One might even resign oneself to the inevitability of “regret” in exchange for this denuding of anxiety, for a false return to the innocence of inexperience. In this light, even repetitions of pain, loss, or disintegration may seem sources of succor, welcome abandonments.