

WAITING FOR THE BUS:
THE SENSUOUS EXPERIENCE OF DIMENSION



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In my article on boredom 'What Can I Do?' I implied that there were two differentiated states, the one healthy the other not. While boredom is usually always problematic to some extent, it is important to make this distinction. Waiting is a natural enough experience and often involves an element of boredom, and I'd go further and say it was vital, waiting. I think of the line in T.S.Eliot's *East Coker*, 'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope' (Eliot, 1944 p. 19). That comes from a sense of the vitality of such a posture. Yet it does not clarify the distinction with boredom as an oppressive bugbear and which, in a very real sense is *without hope*. The thought that 'hope would be hope for the wrong thing' (*ibid.*) is expectant of something on the basis of which 'the darkness shall be the light' and the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting'. The two states of boredom can thus be contrasted according to the presence of a belief as to whether something new or nothing at all will eventually transpire. The question how such resilience comes into being and, on the other hand, what prevents its development, is something of a mystery and one that maturational theory seeks to account for.

One theory imagines a process by which sense data arise namelessly. What we call hunger (after the event) might be thought of as one example. As long as it is not initially comprehended (by another) and satisfied it grows in intensity approaching what we might call (in hindsight) the terror of imminent death. At which point (with *comprehension*) it begins to be transformed into an emotional experience such as where I might think how good it is to be hungry because it intensifies the pleasure of eating and in this way waiting gains a

name. In other words, the inchoate sense data is transformed into a modicum of the individual's narrative, available to memory and imagination. To whatever extent this transformation fails the sense data have to be evacuated, but still remain, unconsciously and unpredictably, to affect and limit thought. It may even be that over-eating implies that something has gone wrong at a primitive stage so that feeding oneself becomes a way of countering and fragmenting the terror that lies behind incomprehensible hunger-data.

The transfer of such a theory to the *problem* of boredom is obvious. In this case one might imagine the sense data to be what might be called (in hindsight) the urge to look around and see what's *out there* combined with the need (nameless at this stage) to find a personal connection with selected aspects of what is other than self (not-me). This would, to start with, be transitional, having the means of brokering a relationship between inside and outside. The point at which this fails entails the partial or complete evacuation of that desire.

Compare that fate of desire with what Jean-Paul Sartre means by the term *mauvais foi* (bad faith), namely living a lie where deceiver and deceived are one and the same person, a state of knowing and not knowing, not knowing it to be a lie, but sensing that it does not ring true. Apart from the eliding of truth, this, 'bad faith' according to Sartre is the evasion of decision-making as a reaction in an attempt to try and escape the experience of dread (*angoisse*) when faced with the need to make choices which will decide who we are, something Sartre thinks we can, however, never know (completely?).

It would be a simplification to imagine that the need to try to arrive at such knowledge is represented in a (*meaningless*) single sense data. Yet it does not seem far-fetched to link the emotional experience that derives from sense data (if *comprehended*) with an eventual capacity for decision-making that is more or less congruent with a potential sense of oneself. Neither, I think, is Sartre's 'angoisse' so far removed from the exigency that can well be imagined as belonging to the emergence of sense data in search of a symbol and as contributory to the development of a sense of oneself, which can, to some extent, be put into thoughts, words and dreams, the texture of life.

In the phrase 'sensuous experience of dimension' with respect to complexions of boredom, the use of the word 'sensuous' indicates a sense impression or apprehension at the threshold of thought. It is a mere conjecture. The word 'dimension', therefore, which refers to the measurement of space, is used here as a metaphor of psychic space (or lack of it). In the case of inveterate boredom, the metaphor is 'the length and breadth of the matter'. This is distinct from a space that is transitional, that is, having an outcome. The idea of dimension is then applicable either to a place of potential revelation or, in the case of a pathological *ennui*, a situation refractory of such a realisation, a setting not readily susceptible to thought in terms of providing a releasing of the mind from its confines. As dimension it is either a broad room with a view or a narrow, lumber room, a bolt hall, a disavowal.

In a late paper Freud writes that if the infant 'under the sway of a powerful instinctual demand which *it is accustomed to satisfy...*' [my italics] if the process encounters a real danger, the frightened child 'must decide either to recognize the real danger, give way to it and renounce the instinctual satisfaction, or to disavow reality and make itself believe that there is no reason for fear, so that it may be able to retain the satisfaction' (Freud, 1938). By his use of the word 'accustomed' Freud implies that the advent of the pathology may happen at any stage of the maturational process he is proposing. Pervasive boredom would seem to be an example of the first option and perversion the second. Or there may be a mix of both solutions in the same personality, which add up to a confinement. For Bion, the instinct towards meaning is one such (nameless) demand, so that for him evacuation involves settling for untruth as opposed to realisation. The feasibility of realisation in the face of disavowal of meaning I will try to address in a later paper.

It is necessary to distinguish the sense of dimension from Bion's concept of a 'beta-element'. My use of the word 'dimension' implies a consciousness of confines – severely restricting or roomy, accessible to the outside air. On the other hand, '[t]he concept of beta-elements includes only sense-impressions, the sense-impression as if it were a part of the personality experiencing the sense-impression, and the sense-impression as if it were the thing-in-itself to which the sense impression corresponds.' (Bion, 1962, p. 26). What Bion intends here is that there is nothing in the beta-element that relates to external reality; it is raw emotion arising wholly from within and is coterminous with anxiety in search of meaning. If meaning cannot emerge from a movement towards the outside it returns to a state of chaos.

'Dimension' is a metaphor for the development of this search for self at the 'contact-barrier', which is itself fundamentally distinct from the raw sense-impression by being a visual or otherwise sensible image (of constraint or containment). It accords length and breadth to a deepening trust in comprehension or compression for the lack of it, whereas the raw sense-data seems to involve an aggressive move that tends more and more to the act of clutching at straws, and subsequently either to breakthrough or to reversal and evacuation when it is thought to have become a symptom. The vicissitudes of this search for comprehension depend on the receptivity encountered at the contact barrier, where it can begin to be given a relational value in the psyche. And depending on that, the metaphor of space will either be transitional or confining.

The psychic phenomenon of inveterate boredom, or ennui, is in opposition to the natural dormant or quiescent state in the emotional world, necessary for self discovery, what Winnicott calls the 'capacity to be alone (in the presence of the mother)' and which I have indexed by the shorthand of 'comprehension'. The former state can be considered as the sense-impression of a lack of dimension in which the self would seem to be located neither in internal nor external space, and not an emotional experience. It is thus *incomprehensible* and a prison. Here are a few words by Giuliana Milana (1986, p.52 –53) about a little Italian boy, aged nine - 'The sense of an inner

space emerges in a curious way in his drawings – they are still entirely flat, without perspective, but alongside the part of the object depicted he draws the sides or the top or bottom, as if the three dimensional volume of the object, perceived in some manner, is broken down into planes again in the act of communication. Together with an image of an inner space there also appears, forcefully, the anxiety-ridden phantasy of a small being imprisoned in a closed space, cut off from the rest of the world:... the baby chick that cannot hatch and dies suffocated inside the eggshell.' It is a compromise, a disavowal of chaos, hard to emerge from. Along with the boredom there is the irritation, the perverse behaviour, the anxiety, and confusion, all of which may be signs of a desperation to find a way back to the maternal object and to spacious honest thought.

At the end of Sartre's play *Huis Clos*, a portrayal of hell very close to interminable boredom, the door opens, but none of the prisoners have the strength to leave and end their punishment (vid. Sartre, 1944). As 'a nothing' (no name) this futility is well expressed by Fernando Pessoa as his 'moral disgust at all attempts to systematise the unknown' (Pessoa, 2005, p.16).

In conclusion I will just mention what seems fairly obvious namely, that being bored is something different from being boring. For one thing, seldom will a bore admit he is boring. He just bores you. And the fact that you are bored with him does not mean that you are simply self-absorbed; the next man you may find most interesting. But how can being bored by someone be interesting. I think it was Bion who wrote about having a patient who bored him stiff. What did he do? He became interested in his own boredom.

Possibly it's a cover-up, a strategy so that you'll lose interest. He pretends to be interesting you with his flow of talk, but he is covering his traces, throwing you off the track, so that you won't discover some hidden fear – the catastrophic anxiety of changing the psychic status quo. This seems to me to be a case of projection as deflection. You fall asleep while he who has gone to sleep on himself stays of the *qui vive*.

Winnicott said, somewhat archly, that if someone came to him and bored him he would not work with him. His purpose in saying so was to emphasise the crucial importance he placed on playfulness. Becoming quickly bored with someone indicates that he or she won't or can't play. And what is playing but risking surprise, testing one's flexibility, enjoying the sense of rapport with another. To be a bore indicates a certain commitment to deadness.

NOTE

Symbol is from the Greek *symbolon*, a token –*syn*, together, *ballein*, to throw, meaning *thrown together*. The word has its origin in an ancient practice of registering a meeting when each half of a broken pot given to separate individuals, were brought together and became one. A word is a *symbol* of thought. It emerges as a result when the *sense datum* becomes an emotional experience and becomes comprehensible through its containment by the (m)other. *Krug* is German for *pot*.



Garance Werthmuller: *Krug*

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