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Review of The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event

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Krzysztof Ziarek, *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001. 355 pp. ISBN 0810118351.

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Krzysztof Ziarek has written a dense, finely wrought, and important book. It concerns, centrally, the question of experience, as itself the transformative medium of human temporality, the means through which we have a formative history, and the modern depletion of that type of experience. The notion that modernity is constituted by a transformation in the nature of experience, a destruction of experience in a robust sense, *Erfahrung*, into a thinner form of immediacy, *Erlebnis*, stands near the center of Walter Benjamin's thought, most notably in "The Storyteller" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," and hence, by extension, *The Arcades Project*. Because, naively, we are never without experience, then it was only for a brief moment, say the moment of Baudelaire, that humans underwent this transformation; once the transformation has been undergone it becomes of necessity invisible: we live in the immediacy of *Erlebnis*, oblivious to the destruction that has occurred. It was against the looming invisibility of the loss, the emphatic experience of modernity as the destruction of experience that was fast moving beyond experience, and as a consequence the nature of modernity passing into oblivion, that Benjamin undertook his heroic attempt to provide a history of the nineteenth century in which the transformation in literary forms would emerge as the Geiger counter registering the destruction taking place. For Benjamin, modernist, avant-garde literature is, minimally, that form of writing seeking to provide us with an experience (*Erfahrung*) of the (looming) absence of experience; because it is the history of modernity that the destruction of experience makes impossible, because thin experience in its givenness, immediacy, and closure supplants any notion of experience as historically formative, then avant-garde literature's interruption of thin experience, its forming it, returns to experience its formative power, its historicity. As Benjamin states at the end of the Baudelaire essay: "Having been betrayed by these last allies of his [the lost women, the outcasts], Baudelaire battled the crowd--with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind. This is the nature of something lived through (*Erlebnis*) to which Baudelaire has given the weight of an experience (*Erfahrung*)." In this light, avant-garde literature (and art more generally) becomes the privileged epistemic instrument for interrogating the displacements, the sufferings and erasures, that, always invisibly and unbeknownst to its victims, constitute the deep texture of modernity. Art, we might say, in giving the absence of experience the shape of experience contextualizes its recipients, so giving historical specificity to the ahistorical flow, the timeless time, of modern life.

Benjamin, however, was not alone in attempting to shape the understanding of modernity through transformations in experience: Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, and Lyotard explicitly pursue analogous analyses. In this context, dogmatic school debates--Heidegger versus Adorno, hermeneutics versus deconstruction--have tended to make the much more important conceptual issues, the conceptualization of experience and the avant-garde, private textual property rather than the massive and central theoretical figures they in truth are. The primary achievement of Ziarek's book is to work the detachment of the historicity of experience in relation to the avant-garde from its local, theoretical hooks into an independent theoretical form. The first three chapters of Ziarek's study elaborate his core notion of experience and avant-garde literature,

while the following four chapters provide intense readings of, respectively, Gertrude Stein, Velimir Khlebnikov, Miron Bialoszewski, and Susan Howe in which the claims of the theory are tested in detail. For reasons I shall come to, and perhaps wrongly, I found Ziarek's theoretical argument more compelling than his exemplifications of it.

Ziarek elaborates his conception of experience by supplementing its Benjaminian core with (i) a Heideggerian account of the relation between art, language, and event (language is not a neutral tool for representation or communication, but involves the event/experience of making present, and art "œa site where experience materializes in its linguistic structures"); (ii) a displacement of Benjamin's soft Marxist account of modernity with Heidegger's analysis of it as the age of technology in which objects are framed in terms of their abstract potential to be used for anonymous ends beyond themselves rather than in terms of their intrinsic and historically accumulated features (correctly assuming that this displacement is not absolute but contextual--commodification and technological revealing are two aspects of a univocal syndrome); (iii) a demonstration that technological objectification involves a flattening and homogenizing of the everyday, an emptying of it, and that the artistic, avant-garde undoing of technological modes of understanding points to a transformation in respect to the everyday and the ordinary (the ordinary revealed as not ordinary but sublime, event-full); and finally, (iv) following Irigaray, an argument to the effect that, to put it crudely, *Erlebnis* is not only a consequence of technological revealing, but equally the suppression of sexual difference, entailing that the sought-for poetics of experience, *Erfahrung*, would necessarily be sexuate (and conversely: that giving experience a sexuate texture is necessarily a component in the interruption of technological suppression). Ziarek convincingly demonstrates that these elements are not merely a loose and convenient association of ideas, but hang together as a unique and powerful constellation through which the historicity of experience is revealed. That demonstration, however, is not solely a theoretical matter but takes effect in part through the four readings; in this respect the relation of the two parts of the argument is more like adumbration and fulfillment than theory and illustration/application. The overlapping and interpenetration of the moments in Ziarek's constellation are happily announced in the chapter titles of his poets: "œGertrude Stein's Poetics of the Event: Avant-Garde, the Ordinary, and Sexual Difference" ; "œHistory and Revolution: Khlebnikov's Futurist Revision of Modern Rationality in *Zangezi*" ; "œHow to Write the Everyday in Eastern Europe: Miron Bialoszewski's "Minor" Poetry" ; "œA Sounding of Uncertainty: Susan Howe's Poetic Gendering of History."

Avant-garde poetry could not possess the pivotal epistemic role Ziarek assigns to it without a weighty theory of language; it is for this reason that Heidegger's philosophy of language comes to provide the theoretical underpinning of Ziarek's project as a whole. Ziarek does not so much offer an argumentative defense of Heidegger's linguistic thought as provide a presentation of it which is then exemplified by his poets. The strategy of Chapter 1 of his study, in which Benjamin's account of experience in modernity is twinned with Heidegger's account of the event of language, is double: On the one hand, Ziarek is implicitly contending that Benjamin's notion of avant-garde literature as providing for an experience of modernity's absence of experience requires a theory of language that Benjamin's own, speculative and dubious, linguistic thought cannot secure but Heidegger's can; on the other hand, by binding Heidegger's account of the event of language to the urgencies of

modernity's oblivion of experience (its denial of singularity and particularity) as understood by Benjamin, Ziarek can detach Heidegger's philosophy of language from its conservative, mystical obeisance to the event of Being, and bind it to the particularities of the concrete and the everyday. Hence, the at first sight odd coupling of Benjamin and Heidegger, a coupling legitimated by the overlap in their understandings of the destruction of the historicity of experience in modernity, allows Ziarek to shed from each thinker his speculative excesses, leaving behind, so to speak, a critical rational kernel. Although he does not state his ambition in quite these terms--he is more generous to both than either deserves--such is the effect of his writing. Once the Heideggerian event of language is firmly redirected toward the suppressed claims of those concrete particulars that language both reveals and denies in its revealing--always a vector in Heidegger's account of experience (the jug, the bridge, the peasant shoes)--the way is open to deploy avant-garde poetry's linguistic self-consciousness, its making of language syntactically and semantically opaque, as a form of encountering the fate of experience within modernity: "Avant-garde art is the attempt to measure the extent to which the everyday coincides with the technological pattern of experience and . . . to open an alternative view of experience . . . [T]he avant-garde keeps restaging the event of experience--and experience as event--in order to see if experience in the modern technological world indeed explains itself fully in terms dictated by the metaphysical project of rationalization" (89). As a summary statement of what is truly important about avant-garde art, this seems to me telling and compelling.

Yet one might feel that this not altogether unfamiliar left Heideggerian view cannot fully own up to its claim to the everyday since, crudely, the emphasis on the event of disclosure itself--all that Heidegger talk about how language *reveals* the world, with the talk about the event of language as the experience of language itself as event--tends toward a suppression of sensuousness and materiality that is integral to the everyday. It is here that the final element of Ziarek's constellation kicks in. Grant, for the sake of argument, that the same epistemic mechanism that generates the rationalization of experience generates the construction of woman as the "natural" other to the cultural, universal, ideal man of reason (the standard Beauvoir picture). It would then follow that what enables the suppression of particularity in the face of technological universality is the eschewal of the material conditions for meaning. More simply, pure reason cannot avow its own material conditions of possibility, which is the implication of Irigaray's wonderful account of how in the course of the emergence of Plato's neophyte into the sunshine and thence the pure light of ideas there occurs a denial of the materiality of the cave itself as the passageway through which that emergence occurs. The duality of sensible and intelligible, matter and meaning, can thus be seen to converge with what transforms *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis*, entailing, thereby, that the recovery of experience requires its materialization. For Ziarek, Irigaray's sexually determinate image of the "proximity" of the two lips thus comes to displace the two of identity and difference, intelligible and sensible: "Irigaray proposes to see experience in terms of an event that matters or materializes as the unsettling and changing proximity between materiality and signification. The double valency of matter [matter mattering]-- . . . the event of materialization--reflects Irigaray's revision of experience through the prism of proximity, where matter is neither one nor two, that is, where materiality can neither be separated from signification nor collapsed into its discursive construction" (125). Ziarek's appropriation of Irigaray follows the path of Irigaray's own revision of Heidegger in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (alas, not Irigaray's

most convincing text) in which she *poetically performs* a critique of Heideggerian thought that is intended to parallel her original Plato critique--the thought of the meaning of being forgets the (material) air that is its medium. Irigaray's poetic performance both accedes to Heidegger--poetry is the performance of language in its (material) eventfulness that is suppressed by discursive reason and representational discourse--whilst revealing Heidegger's Platonic repression of materiality.

However schematic, diluted and emaciated, which is to say apart from Ziarek's detailing and the numerous objections to that detailing one might raise, this is not, I hope, an unfair outline of the constellation around the historicity of experience he lays out in his opening chapters. What is perhaps surprising is not the constellation itself, which seems to me almost inevitable, but that it has taken till Ziarek's effort to be firmly articulated. There is, however, a reason for this; Ziarek is here putting to rest what has been a resilient bit of theoretical dogmatism. At some indeterminate moment in the past century the presumption arose that once one takes the linguistic turn, once language is regarded as the irreplaceable medium of understanding, then the notion of experience comes to appear as if hopelessly bound to a more primitive and now defunct conception of the relation between mind and world. Experience thus came to stand for *everything* which taking the linguistic turn must repudiate; experience was a term beyond the possibility of redemption or rehabilitation, belonging forever to a pre-modern, metaphysical past. That extreme, reductive view was never persuasive: to say that experience is always linguistically mediated does not entail the elimination of experience but its historicity; to say that experience is always linguistically mediated requires, and cannot eliminate, that there be an experience of language. Finally, of course, the conception of experience that was regarded as metaphysically defunct was *Erlebnis*; but *Erlebnis* turns out to be a formation of experience that is a consequence of rationalized linguistic practices. Ziarek, responding to what was there anyway in Heidegger, Benjamin, & co., to feminist materialism and renewed interest in the ordinary, has placed experience back into the center of our self-understanding, and seen how the radical art of modernity has been centrally concerned with the recovery of experience in its robust sense.

What is equally surprising, to me at least, is what Ziarek understands by avant-garde poetry, how he thinks it differs from modernism, and how he thinks it avoids the modernist dilemma: "The technological either renders the poetic a priori ineffectual, by definition alienated from reality, or permits us to read poetic contestations of the everyday only as forms of aestheticization, as venues for an artistic escape from praxis and the "real" concerns of day-to-day living" (132). (This passage slightly misstates the dilemma since it gives only one side: the alienation from the everyday and "only forms of aestheticization" are the same thought in slightly different terms; the other side of the dilemma should have been a collapse of art back into the world from which it means to be critically departing. So either critical but alienated, *or* worldly but lacking critical force.)

Ever since Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974; tr., 1984), the operative distinction between modernism and the avant-garde has been that the former accepts the enclosure of art within an autonomous domain as condition for its unique forms of meaning, whilst the ambition of the latter is to break down the wall separating art from reality in order to generate a true transformation of the social world. The advantage of this account is that it

connects the historical reality of the avant-garde, including its political ambitiousness and hopefulness, to a conceptually useful distinction--a distinction that only historically emerges and achieves any kind of stability as a consequence of the political failures of the avant-garde. In this context, Ziarek's attempt to re-configure the meaning of the avant-garde seems stipulative and willful. He contends that the avant-garde impulse involves a "rethinking of being in terms of event, whose historicity undoes, together with subject and essence, the idea of private aesthetic experience. Avant-garde art explicitly distances itself from the concept of aesthetic experience as a separate, "higher" or "more essential" moment of experience..." (9). The notion of "aesthetic experience" here is, I think, just a red herring, totally outside the terms of the debate, belonging emphatically to modern art before the advent of modernism.

Central to any conception of the autonomy of modernist art is the thought that it is the kind of art that binds itself to the material conditions of its medium: poetry to language as such, painting to paint on canvas, etc. Hence, to employ neutral examples outside poetry, the paintings of Picasso and Pollock, unquestionably high modernists, turn on precisely their foregrounding of the medium as the material condition of an irreducible meaning. Since this is just the sort of effort that Ziarek wants to extract from his poets (Stein and Howe do to language pretty much what Picasso and Pollock do to paint-stuff and canvas), and since he even mentions Lyotard's (mistaken) interpretation of Barnett Newman (a high modernist if ever there was one) in order to focus his claim, I am baffled by his notion of avant-garde, baffled as to what Tzara or Duchamp have to do with such an argument, and baffled as to why the subtitle of his book is not "Modernity, Modernism, and the Event." Perhaps Ziarek is addressing some theoretical debates outside my ken; but his account sounds to me for all the world like a defense of high modernism. From which it follows that his poets "suffer" the autonomy of art in all the ways that, for example, Adorno and Greenberg elaborated: the condition of artistic critique is that it is cut off from everyday practice, and thus a priori unable to restructure the deep mechanisms constituting the modern world. Becoming poetically aware of commodification, say, is not, by itself, going to do anything to overcome the mechanisms of capital rationalization--which is all that was ever meant by "autonomy." This is not to deny that modernist art provides experience, that such experience provides a form of historical self-consciousness not otherwise available, or that the securing of such self-consciousness depends upon the art conveying it to turn against its own "aesthetic" enclosure, to turn against beauty and harmony and perfection, against beautiful semblance. Being against aesthetic semblance has belonged to modernism from the outset, right from Rimbaud's spleen and Baudelaire's lost women and outsiders.

But there may be something else going on here. After all, one might well ask why Ziarek has chosen just these four poets to discuss? Let me say, before commenting, that I am out of my depth here: I am not a literary scholar, and with respect to Khlebnikov and Bialoszewski, I lack even the linguistic skills to speak competently about their achievements. From the perspective of the amateur, Ziarek's accountings of these poets struck me, for the most part, as highly tuned, subtle, and convincing--indeed, in a sense too convincing. I ask the question about Ziarek's choice, and his obvious eschewal of more familiar writers, because, to my ear, these are all emphatically "minor" poets. And while their being minor in the sense of marginal has something to do with Ziarek's landing on them, I have in mind something else, namely, (and here I speak with any confidence only with respect to Stein and Howe) that their poetry is

marked by an insistent gap between performance and idea. Stein and Howe are remarkably *interesting* writers, but that interestingness is for both always underdetermined by their writerly performances; hence for both, their ideas, what they mean to be doing in their writing, exceed the accomplishment of the writing itself: the motive for Stein's stripping poetry of nouns, or for Howe's paratactic enjambments, her production of strings of words without explicit connectives is intelligible, but only rarely does that intelligible motive manage to fully saturate the poetry it informs. Because there is a gap between idea and performance, then, these are writers who create occasions for intense intellectual encounter, but little in the way of experience. (It may be that they write in order that what is written cannot be "experienced" since for them experience is contaminated with aesthetic illusion.) The powerful intellectual ambitions of their work make them ideal fodder for the theorist--which is what I meant by saying Ziarek's richly argued accounts were too convincing: in the end, idea swamps experience. Which is to say, that in these cases at least, the writers fail to actually provide the "experience" that can be a counter to its technological flattening; instead what we get is the *idea* of, the need or necessity for such an alternative experience--something no one would dare claim about, say, Virginia Woolf or Paul Celan (or, of course, about Picasso or Pollock).

I had not read Bialoszewski before encountering him here (and encountering him here certainly makes me want to read more); but for me a similar problem arises in Ziarek's portrait. Here is "A Ballad of Going Down to a Store."

First I went into the street
down the stairs,
would you believe it,
down stairs.

Then acquaintances of strangers
and I passed one another by.
What a pity
you did not see
how people walk,
what a pity.

I entered a complete store
There were glass lamps burning,
I saw someone--who sat down
And what did I hear? what did I hear?
The rustle of bags and human talk.

And indeed,
Indeed
I returned.

Ziarek usefully comments on the invocation of the conventions of the Romantic ballad and the aesthetic of the grotesque, and how they are here turned away from their original objects and toward the everyday that the conventions themselves repudiate. He goes on to comment: "A

routine trip to the store discloses an unexpected sensual and existential intricacy; it becomes what it, in fact, always is, a singular event" (244). Now as a description of this poem, this seems to me just wrong: there are utterly anonymous streets and stairs, strangers without definition, a complete but utterly generic store, indifferent gas lamps. The Eliotic touch about "The rustle of bags and human talk" is powerful, not, however, in conveying a concrete, existential experience, but rather through its reduction of human talk to the level of the rustle of bags. Indeed, I would suggest that Bialoszewski is here turning the everyday emphatically *away* from the quality of being existentially intricate and utterly singular; rather, working from the other direction, by attaching the conventions of the tradition to the anonymous mundane the poem reveals how starkly empty and silly those conventions were. The obvious portentousness, silliness, of the opening and final stanzas--the self-conscious use of repetition to give everyday acts the quality of something more--mocks the pretentiousness of poetic diction generally. In this context the repeating of "down the stairs" and "indeed" is comical--how else would one get to the street but down the stairs and what else would one do after shopping but return--and not intensifying. What we get in the end is not an intense experience of the everyday, but the hollowness of poetic convention. This is intriguing in its own terms, but they are not the ones Ziarek means to profess.

To be sure, there are moments in all these poets that indeed provide what Stein calls "intense existence" --"Lifting Belly" remains an incomparable hymn to (Sapphic) sexual love--but these are moments in writings that for the most part are driven by complex and demanding ideas which are only too rarely linguistically realized. Because the ideas matter, these poets matter; because the ideas remain, too often, ideas, the concept always more palpable than its material presentation, these poets remain "minor." Hence my puzzlement about Ziarek's choosing them.

Now, to answer my own original question, I would hazard that Ziarek did choose them because, first, they are minor, marginal (sexually, politically, linguistically, geographically), and because, like the *Trauerspiel* in Benjamin's accounting, a minor art from the margin and the victim can possess critical powers that the major art of a time cannot possess. Second, not irrelevantly, these four writers really do, however differently, further the elaboration of the constellation around the historicity of experience. They are perfect vehicles for Ziarek's theoretical purposes--but, again, too perfect. It is worth remembering that Benjamin's account of the mourning play was intended to model an understanding of, above all, high modernism, which is exactly how it did come to function in both his own and Adorno's later writings.

These remarks should be considered less a criticism of Ziarek, although I guess there is some of that occurring, and more a signaling of disappointment. I would hope, as a reader of poetry, that the poetry chosen would truly, which is to say, poetically exemplify the idea of the historicity of experience that Ziarek so marvelously elaborates (not least through the exposition of these poets). One might suppose Ziarek responding to me that what I am asking from the poets is in part what their writing contests; but this cannot really be his response (even if one imagines the poets defending themselves in this way--as I concede any of these four may well do) since his poetics requires, to use the Benjaminian phrase again, that something lived through be given the weight of experience. From other cases--Beckett, Celan--we know that linguistic opacity and poetic experience need not diverge. Since I agree with Ziarek about the role of experience in

modernist poetry, I find it disturbing that I cannot make concrete sense of his choice of poets. That said, Ziarek has produced a significant work; his constellation elaborating the historicity of experience deserves a place in, and will need to be reckoned with, by any future reading of modernist art.