

"Experience"

In our struggle for responsibility, we fight against someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called "experience." It is expressionless, impenetrable, and ever the same. The adult has always already experienced [*erlebt*] everything: youth, ideals, hopes, woman. It was all illusion.—Often we feel intimidated or embittered. Perhaps he is right. What can our retort be? We have not yet experienced [*erfahren*] anything.

But let us attempt to raise the mask. What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us? This above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted; he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right. Saying this, he smiles in a superior fashion: this will also happen to us—in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture, before the long sobriety of serious life. Thus the well-meaning, the enlightened. We know other pedagogues whose bitterness will not even concede to us the brief years of youth; serious and grim, they want to push us directly into life's drudgery. Both attitudes devalue and destroy our years. More and more we are assailed by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand "experience," the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy. Such is life. That is what adults tell us, and that is what they experienced.

Yes, that is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality. Have they ever encouraged us to anything great or new or forward-looking? Oh, no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. All meaning—the true, the good, the beautiful—is grounded within itself. What, then, does experience signify?—

And herein lies the secret: because he never raises his eyes to the great and the meaningful, the philistine has taken experience as his gospel. It has become for him a message about life's commonness. But he has never grasped that there exists something other than experience, that there are values—inexperienceable—which we serve.

Why is life without meaning, or solace for the philistine? Because he knows experience and nothing else. Because he himself is desolate and without spirit. And because he has no inner relationship to anything other than the common and the always-already-out-of-date.

We, however, know something different, which experience can neither give to us nor take away: that truth exists, even if all previous thought has been an error. Or: that fidelity shall be maintained, even if no one has done so yet. Such will cannot be taken from us by experience. Yet—are our elders, with their tired gestures and their superior hopelessness, right about *one* thing—namely, that what we experience will be sorrowful and that only in the inexperienceable can courage, hope, and meaning be given foundation? Then the spirit would be free. But again and again life would drag it down because life; the sum of experience, would be without solace.

We no longer understand such questions, however. Do we still lead the life of those unfamiliar with the spirit? Whose sluggish ego is buffered by life like waves against the rocks? No. Each of our experiences has its content. We ourselves invest them with content by means of our own spirit—he who is thoughtless is satisfied with error. "You will never find the truth!" he exclaims to the researcher. "That is my experience." For the researcher, however, error is only an aid to truth (Spinoza). Only to the mindless [*Geistlosen*] is experience devoid of meaning and spirit. To the one who strives, experience may be painful, but it will scarcely lead him to despair.

In any event, he would never obtrusely give up and allow himself to be anesthetized by the rhythm of the philistine. For the philistine, you will have noted, only rejoices in every new meaninglessness. He remains in the right. He reassures himself: spirit does not really exist. Yet no one demands harsher submission or greater "awe" before the "spirit." For if he were to become critical, then he would have to create as well. That he cannot do. Even the experience of spirit, which he undergoes against his will, becomes for him mindless [*geistlos*].

Tell him

That when he becomes a man

He should revere the dreams of his youth.¹

Nothing is so hateful to the philistine as the "dreams of his youth." And most of the time, sentimentality is the protective camouflage of his hatred. For what appeared to him in his dreams was the voice of the spirit, calling him once, as it does everyone. It is of *this* that youth always reminds him,

eternally and ominously. That is why he is antagonistic toward youth. He tells young people of that grim, overwhelming experience and teaches them to laugh at themselves. Especially since "to experience" [*Erleben*] without spirit is comfortable, if unredeeming.

Again: we know a different experience. It can be hostile to spirit and destructive to many blossoming dreams. Nevertheless, it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate because it can never be without spirit while we remain young. As Zarathustra says, the individual can experience himself only at the end of his wandering. The philistine has his own "experience"; it is the eternal one of spiritlessness. The youth will experience spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains greatness, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person.—When he becomes a man, the youth will be compassionate. The philistine is intolerant.

Written in 1913; published pseudonymously in *Der Anfang*, 1913–1914. Translated by Lloyd Spencer and Stefan Jost.

Notes

1. Friedrich Schiller, *Don Carlos*, IV, 21, lines 4287–4289.