Introduction

Solescence. On this view, what makes Baudelaire a modern classic is his success at grasping this transformation of the momentary into the outmoded as a permanent feature of modern life.

In 1905, less than forty years after Baudelaire’s death, a thinker whose influence on Benjamin should not be underestimated, Georg Simmel, linked the increasing importance of fashion in contemporary culture both to “the specifically ‘impatient’ tempo of modern life” and to the fact that “the great, lasting, unquestioned convictions are more and more losing their force.”

Modern experience is conditioned by the continuous destruction of the historical, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic contexts that give human life meaning—by what Benjamin called the eclipse of Erfahrung in favor of punctual Erlebnisse. In modernity, experience is defined, so to speak, by its own disappearance. As a consequence, in the words of Robert Musil, “A world of qualities without a man has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them… Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view… has finally arrived at the “I” itself, for the belief that the most important thing about experience is that one experiences it or of action that one does it, is beginning to strike most people as naïve.”

In boredom, the disappearance of experience is manifested in precisely such alienation from one’s own doing and being: it is a quotidian crisis of subjectivity. By attending to both the socio-historical and the linguistic construction of this experience without qualities, I bring social scientific perspectives on the constitution of subjective experience into conversation with aesthetic and cultural understandings of what makes subjective experience modern. The object is to mediate between humanistic and social scientific rhetorics in a fashion that neither reduces questions of meaning to sociological epiphenomena nor treats them in abstraction from the historical and material contexts in which they arise. My strategy for articulating these modes of interpretation is contained, in a nutshell, in the claim that the experience without qualities is a symptom of the democratization of skepticism in modernity. This formulation points to dimensions of modern experience that neither Weber’s ‘disenchantment of the world’ nor Nietzsche’s ‘nihilism’ capture: ‘democratization’ for the positive or at least potentially positive dimension of the loss of epistemic and cultural frameworks in modernity and ‘skepticism’ for the incomplete way in which religious and other metanarratives have actually been overcome.

Although the questions of meaning associated with boredom are not new, I argue that the pervasiveness of the experience beginning in the nineteenth century is an index of the way traditional understandings of the significance of human existence had been undermined—an index of the democratization of skepticism in the broadest sense. On my reading, it is the way the language of boredom figures a relationship between subjective malaise and the materially palpable transformations of modern culture that led to its extremely rapid diffusion in the course of the nineteenth century. By turning the material effects of modernization into ciphers for the problem of meaning, the experience became a lived metaphor for the dilemmas that plague modern subjects. In other words, that in the mid-nineteenth century boredom “began to be felt on an epidemic scale” is a consequence of the diffusion of a new metaphors, a new, skeptical idiom of reflection on subjective experience. Historically speaking, the ubiquity of such boredom is thus a sign of how deep and widespread epistemological and ethical problems remain in the purportedly rationalized and secularized landscape of modernity.

As I have already argued, this experience of subjective malaise—or more precisely, this way of talking about subjective malaise—embodies a specifically modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience. The difficulties in grasping boredom as an historically specific experience are grounded in structural features of that historically evolving rhetoric—features that, as I shall show in the next section, also map onto the disciplinary division of “modernity” into aesthetic and socio-political dimensions.

Discourse

Sans la faim des choses spirituelles on s’en ennui…

Pascal

From its beginnings in the Enlightenment, the modern discourse on boredom reflected a wide range of understandings of the experience, many of which still persist. Depending on the context, boredom is held to be merely subjective or to be a response to an objective reality; considered a spontaneous feeling or a cultivated mental attitude; diagnosed as a nervous illness or explained as an emotional response to the world; treated as ethical problem or dismissed as a physiological reflex. As this sampling of possible interpretations indicates, the discourse on boredom is deeply imbricated with fundamental questions regarding the nature of subjectivity. But how is this fact to be understood? Certainly the discourse on boredom has been shaped by the secular modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience.

18Georg Simmel Gesammelte Werke, vol. 1, 150.


18"Without the hunger for spiritual things one is bored" (Pensées, 378).
 Conversely, however, the ambiguity of the experience itself, in which now self, now world seems decisive, seemingly destined 'boredom' to play a pivotal role in shaping that rhetoric.

While boredom appears to be a private experience of primarily subjective significance, its very pervasiveness marks it as a socially meaningful phenomenon. When boredom is approached from distinct, disciplinarily located perspectives, it tends to be defined in ways that divide along the lines of this ambiguity—roughly speaking into philosophical and sociological accounts of the experience. The scholarly discourse on boredom thus maps onto an existing division of labor within intellectual endeavors: matters of heart and mind to the humanists, material conditions to the (social) scientists. Not only, qua experience, does boredom transcend such a division; as it was constituted historically, the language of boredom figured the effects of the material transformations taking place in the modern world on subjective experience. Examining how and why that discourse developed as it did in the course of the nineteenth century can therefore illuminate what is at stake in the contemporary bifurcation of reflection into abstractly philosophical and reductively sociological accounts of subjective experience.

As Nietzsche remarked, only that can be defined which has no history. Thus a universal definition of boredom could only be achieved at the cost of abstracting this highly ambiguous and eminently historical phenomenon from the very experiential context that gives the question of its meaning such significance. What is called for is, rather, a genealogy of the experience, an account that aims to discern in the vicissitudes of the discourse on boredom the traces of modernity's impact on subjective experience. By analyzing that discourse and interpreting the significance of its historical evolution, this study aims to elucidate the role 'boredom' came to play within the wider discourse on the subjective effects of modernization. Rather than abstracting the experience from its historical context, this approach encompasses the real ambiguities and contradictions that characterize the discourse on boredom in a way that has methodological implications for the human sciences in general, since genuinely historical inquiries into the constitution of modern subjection needs to be grounded in the sociological and philosophical complexities of particular cultural phenomena.

As we have already noted, boredom is a peculiarly self-sufficient form of malaise, a misery in which existential despair is entirely compatible with subjective self-satisfaction. Rather than treating the nihilistic dynamic of the experience either as a metaphysical sign or as a sociological symptom, my genealogical approach to the discourse on the experience thus foregrounds the relations between the ambiguity of boredom and the organization of the categorial divisions that characterize the discourse surrounding it. Unlike its foes and advocates in either analytical camp, I am not concerned to demonstrate the importance of boredom per se. Its interest, on my reading, lies in what the discourse on boredom reveals about the way the language of reflection on subjective experience has changed over time. My argument therefore focuses on the historical vicissitudes of the experience—on the way the evolution of the discourse on boredom maps onto structural transformations in the post-Enlightenment discourse of reflection on subjective experience as such. Insofar as the genealogy of boredom illuminates the fundamental features of that modern rhetoric of experience, this study provides a model for experientially grounded, historical inquiry into the discursive constitution of modern subjectivity. Of particular interest is the way the historical development of the discourse on boredom illustrates the relations between subjective crisis and the paradigm shift toward the material explanation of malaise in modernity—relations to which the pervasiveness of the discourse on boredom itself testifies.

Such an inquiry into the cultural significance of boredom is inherently inter- and indeed metadisciplinary. Interdisciplinary, because it integrates the seemingly incompatible results of previous studies, which have interpreted the experience from within particular hermeneutic horizons. Metadisciplinary, or to invoke a more old-fashioned idiom, rhetorical, because conceptualizing boredom as an historical phenomenon entails reflecting on the relationship between language and experience revealed by the historical development of the discourse. From this broader perspective, the emergence and evolution of that discourse as well as the contradictions and ambiguities within it prove to be symptomatic of more global transformations within the Western rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience in modernity, transformations that have also given rise to our familiar disciplinary divisions. To put the point more concretely: demonstrating that the language of boredom was forged in order to articulate the material and subjective effects of modernization does more than prove that boredom is of both socio-cultural and philosophical interest. It also indicates that the aporia encountered in reflection upon the significance of boredom—the interpretive impasse evident in the disciplinary bifurcation of such reflection—is of historical and philosophical importance. In tracing the development of the discourse on boredom through which that aporia came into being, therefore, my hope is not simply to illustrate the importance of attention to language in examining the historical and cultural construction of subjective experience. By simultane-
ously providing an interpretation of the significance of that development, I also aim to set out a method of rhetorical analysis that integrates empirical material and philosophical reflection in a truly interdisciplinary fashion.

Part I, "The Rhetoric of Experience," proceeds immanently from discussions of particular, disciplinarily located interpretations of subjective malaise to articulate general features of the discourse on boredom. I argue that it is as a distinctively modern form of malaise that boredom is so deeply ambiguous and show that the questions it raises concerning subjectivity must be analyzed historically. By closely examining the arguments of paradigmatic proponents of the philosophical and empirical approaches to the experience that dominate the secondary literature on boredom, Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate that neither mode of conceptualizing boredom can achieve the requisite methodological distance to do so. On the one hand, the philosophical rhetoric of experience, which emphasizes the epistemic and ethical implications of the experience of boredom for the sufferer, universalizes the existential dilemmas of the isolated individual subject and abstracts them from their socio-cultural and historical context. On the other, the social scientific rhetoric of experience, which focuses on what boredom reveals about the effects of cultural and historical circumstances upon human beings, treats the subjective and philosophical significance of the experience as epiphenomenal. That is, both branches of the contemporary discourse of reflection on the experience treat the connection between concrete historical circumstances and the philosophical problems associated with boredom as accidental. This methodological convergence attests to the grounding of these diametrically opposed hermeneutics in a common modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience.

Within the discourse of reflection on boredom as a whole, then, the dichotomy between materialist and idealist rhetorics anchors complementary, equally ahistorical modes of interpreting a form of malaise that is pervasive only in modernity. Or to put the same point from a different angle: the modern rhetoric of reflection in which the discourse on boredom as a whole is grounded is characterized by an ahistorical understanding of subjective experience. Philosophical and social scientific approaches are constitutive elements of the modern discourse on subjective malaise. Insofar as both abstract boredom from its discursive context, neither can give an adequate account of the rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience in which both explanatory paradigms are embedded—an analysis that would be necessary to develop a conception of boredom that did justice to the mediating character of the experience itself.

Like the apparently ahistorical character of boredom, this failure of his-
torical self-reflection is of great historical interest, for the development of the discourse on boredom illustrates a logical dilemma at the heart of the modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience. Taken together, Chapters 1 and 2 show that within the terms of that rhetoric, it is not possible to develop an historically grounded, self-reflexive concept of the experience, since both materialist and idealist approaches to boredom sunder problems of meaning from their historical context. The genealogical endeavor must therefore address the constraints on moving beyond this bifurcation in the rhetoric of reflection.

To do justice to the historical specificity of the experience, I argue, it is necessary to synthesize the strengths of both philosophical and empirical approaches. Literary texts therefore play a crucial role, for in representing boredom, they depict its sociological and philosophical significance as intertwined. Indeed, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, it was literary language that first identified boredom as a specifically modern malaise, as an experience that linked material circumstances and questions of meaning. If the experience that comes to language in boredom is, historically speaking, the consequence of the social transformations we think of as constituting "modernity"—rationalization, secularization, industrialization, urbanization—the language in which that experience takes place is in the first instance a literary language.

This language, this discourse, this metaphorics, figures historically specific experiences of subjective malaise and dislocation in universal, timeless terms—but in a disenchanted and irreligious idiom. Thus what is a very modern discourse on subjective experience, one rooted in a peculiarly modern experience of temporality, tended, and tends, to obscure the historical specificity of that malaise by making it seem universal. Chapter 3 demonstrates that what is at stake in focusing on boredom is the question of the status of the language in which reflection on subjective malaise takes place in modernity. My claim is that the evolution of the discourse on boredom both mirrors and illuminates the transformation—the modernization—of the rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience since the Enlightenment. Examining the linguistic and cultural vicissitudes of the metaphorics of boredom can therefore cast light on the relations between what are often thought of as opposed understandings of modernity and modern life.

The same sociological conditions that helped diffuse the language of boredom throughout society in the course of the nineteenth century also encouraged the development of a disenchanted, materialist and ultimately a medicalized vision of subjective malaise. Ironically, literary 'boredom' (like its cousins, 'ennui' and 'Langeweile') came to seem hackneyed, less an ex-
perience that revealed something about modern subjectivity than a fashionable stance for those who wished neither to engage with material reality nor to confront philosophical questions seriously. As a consequence, even as the experience of boredom grew ubiquitous, the metaphors of boredom lost the power of figuring the relation between questions of meaning and the material effects of modernization. Notably, by the early twentieth century, the topos itself was giving way to a preoccupation with the evacuation of the language of reflection on subjective experience altogether in the modern world. Since this capacity for mediation is what makes boredom a key site for reflection on the relations between the two senses of modernity, the fact that the evolution of the discourse on boredom undermines the power of this language to figure reflection on the full complexity of modern experience is highly significant.

The resulting bifurcation within the rhetoric of reflection on boredom has more than a local or incidental significance, for it reflects the aporetic relation between scientific and humanistic modes of self-understanding that is a fundamental feature of modern thought. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the discourse on boredom should have undergone this development at all, since its original power stemmed from its ability to mediate between the registers kept separate by such disciplinary divisions. Pointing on the one hand toward traditional religious vocabularies of reflection and on the other toward physiological accounts of human experience, the language of boredom was secularized without being mechanistic. The discourse on boredom initially articulated a relationship between the questions of meaning associated with the experience and the social transformations which were underway in the period. However, the pressures that led to the larger split in the rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience soon fractured the rhetoric of boredom as well, so that it no longer seemed to be a single sort of experience which articulated the spiritual and material effects of modernization.

As a materialist interpretation of human existence took root in the course of the nineteenth century, the discourse on boredom fragmented. While empirical—sociological, physiological, psychological—interpretations traced the phenomenon back to the effects of modernization and urbanization on the human organism, interest in the experience of meaninglessness associated with boredom fell to older models of explanation—philosophical, moral, religious accounts of human malaise. If today these modes appear complementary—modernity and tradition, materialism and idealism paradigmatic poles of the modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience—then perhaps because we have begun to move beyond the discourse which, in opposing positivist science to substantive tradition, shaped the crisis of modern subjectivity that culminated in the previous fin-de-siècle. However, precisely in the absence of plausible metanarratives, the task of grasping the problems of meaning associated with boredom in their historical specificity remains. In defining the experience to suit their models, humanists and scientists alike disregard how the experience of boredom mediates subjective and objective, ideal and material. If its lived ambiguity renders boredom a paradigmatically modern experience, the persisting fragmentation of the discourse of reflection on subjective experience obscures boredom's historicity.

In Part I, I argue that to theorize boredom adequately, it is necessary to develop a strategy for historical reflection on the modern rhetoric of reflection as a whole. Chapters 1 and 2 show that the limits of the opposed approaches that dominate the scholarly literature on boredom are anchored in complementary rhetorics of experience, each of which makes it impossible to grasp the experience in an historically adequate fashion. Chapter 3 looks closely at the historical development of the discourse on boredom as a paradigmatically modern experience and thereby illustrates how problems of meaning and the response to concrete historical circumstances were intertwined in that nineteenth-century discourse. Shifting the emphasis from experience to discourse, from the literality to the metaphors of boredom, makes it possible to interpret the significance of the evolution of the language of reflection on subjective malaise—and ipso facto the modern experience of temporality and desire—in this period. The bifurcated rhetoric of experience reflected in the approaches to boredom considered in the first two chapters is itself the product of a particular historical development.

Having established this historical perspective on the modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience, in Part II, "The Rhetoric of Reflection," I take up two more sophisticated attempts to conceptualize boredom. Neither Georg Simmel (Chapter 4) nor Martin Heidegger (Chapter 5) can be accused of disregarding the historicity of subjective experience. Nonetheless, the difficulties encountered in Chapters 1 and 2 return: as a consequence of the historical development of the discourse on boredom, the sociological and philosophical modes of reflection seem virtually to concern different experiences. Only from the genealogical perspective that recognizes the discourse in which both are embedded as the common ground of interpretation do Simmel's 'Bläsiertheit' and Heidegger's 'Langeswelle' converge. Seen in this light, I argue, their very different phenomenologies of subjective malaise in modernity underline the need to focus on the language in which that malaise is formulated—language that is itself shot through with historical particularity. The sixth and final chapter then reads Robert Musil's Man without
Introduction

Qualities as an attempt to forge a new language of reflection on subjective experience that could heal the aporetic division between materialist and idealist rhetorics of experience and thereby overcome the evacuation of the language of reflection on subjective experience in modernity that is registered in the historical vicissitudes of the discourse on boredom. Before turning to this chapter-by-chapter investigation of the rhetoric of the discourse on boredom, however, it will be helpful to consider the historiographical implications of placing the experience without qualities at the center of an investigation of modernity—of interpreting modernity as a process that democratizes skepticism.

History

Since boredom advances and boredom is the root of all evil, no wonder, then, that the world goes backwards, that evil spreads.

Soren Kierkegaard 10

Boredom, which arose in the age of Enlightenment and was democratized in the period of industrial revolution, is a disenchanting, secularized form of human discontent. Its pervasiveness is an index of the decline of traditional understandings of temporality and desire and in particular of religious understandings of human suffering. However, since this radically individualizing experience is lived as though it pertains to the self alone, the bored subject, for whom the experience of empty, meaningless time "takes on the proportions of immortality" cannot perceive that this experience is peculiar to modernity. The historicity of boredom is visible only from a position outside the nihilistic dynamic of the experience—a position that permits reflection on the discursive regime in which this peculiar experience came to be. We have noted that the discourse on boredom links questions of meaning to material effects of modernization. But how, exactly, were the ethical and philosophical effects associated with the experience related to the socio-historical context in which it began to flourish?

As a form of subjective malaise proper to modernity, boredom is first of all an urban phenomenon. Contemporary proclamations about the idiocy of rural life notwithstanding, boredom with provincial existence is a secondary phenomenon: Madame Bovary’s heart belonged to Paris. The experience emerged not out of surfeit with the rhythmic repetitions of life in pre-industrialized society but in response to the superabundance of stimulation, the superfluity of possibilities for personal achievement, the sheer excess of transformation, offered by the modern city. Insofar as boredom is an experience of temporality, it is worth noting that, at least for the working class, it was in the metropolis that the rational order of clock and calendar first eclipsed the natural rhythms of sun and season.

In the nineteenth-century metropolis, everything that had seemed the stable stuff of personal identity was up for grabs. Urbanization was driven by industrialization, both of which fostered new social formations and unmoored people from the strictures of traditional society. Urban anonymity brought both freedoms and terrors. The industrial reorganization of labor produced new forms of leisure and new "occupations" to fill these free hours; crowds flooded the streets and filled cafes, parks, and popular theaters in the evenings and on Sundays. As consumer society and its culture of mass entertainments took form, a newly heterogeneous public began to emerge. Shop-assistants and clerks, domestics and factory-workers, often isolated émigrés whose families were still in the countryside, shared public spaces with aristocrats, well-established bourgeois, and the members of a growing new industrial middle class. However, physical proximity and even shared diversions were by no means equivalent to democratization. Political upheavals proliferated, particularly on the continent, and what was perceived (particularly but by no means exclusively by the ruling classes) as a disconcerting breakdown of traditional social structures, especially of class- and gender-based behavioral norms, seemed to intensify as the century progressed.

The same dissolution of long-established certitudes was evident in the spiritual realm as well. While nineteenth-century Europeans could by no means be called irreligious, the Christian worldview had begun to forfeit its hegemony. The publication of The Origin of Species in 1859 was just one in a series of powerful scientific affronts to traditional ways of thinking about human existence. Even as modern technological and especially medical advances improved the safety and increased the comfort of everyday life, the