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On Being Bored

> Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
> John Berryman, "Dream Song 14"

Children are not oracles, but they ask with persistent regularity the great existential question, "What shall we do now?" Every adult remembers, among many other things, the great ennui of childhood, and every child's life is punctuated by spells of boredom: that state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.

As psychoanalysis has brought to our attention the passionate intensity of the child's internal world, it has tended to equate significance with intensity and so has rarely found a place, in theory, for all those less vehement, vaguer, often more subtle feelings and moods that much of our lives consist of. It is part of Winnicott's contribution to have alerted us to the importance, in childhood, of states of relative quiescence, of moods that could never figure, for example, in Melanie Klein's gothic melodrama of emotional development. Although there are several references in the psychoanalytic literature to the project of the boring patient, and fewer to the seemingly common adult fear of being boring, very little has been written about the child's ordinary experience of being bored, a mood that by definition seems to preclude elaborate description. As any child will tell us, it's just having nothing to do. But moods, of course, are points of view.

Clinically one comes across children unable to be bored, and more often, children unable to be anything else. In any discussion of waiting, at least in relation to the child, it makes

sense to speak of boredom because the bored child is waiting, unconsciously, for an experience of anticipation. In ordinary states of boredom the child returns to the possibility of his own desire. That boredom is actually a precarious process in which the child is, as it were, both waiting for something and looking for something, in which hope is being secretly negotiated; and in this sense boredom is akin to free-floating attention. In the muffled, sometimes irritable confusion of boredom the child is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can crystallize. But to begin with, of course, the child needs the adult to hold, and hold to, the experience—that is, to recognize it as such, rather than to sabotage it by distraction. The child's boredom starts as a regular crisis in the child's developing capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother. In other words, the capacity to be bored can be a developmental achievement for the child.

Experiencing a frustrating pause in his usually mobile attention and absorption, the bored child quickly becomes preoccupied by his lack of preoccupation. Not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were, waiting for himself. Neither hopeless nor expectant, neither intent nor resigned, the child is in a dull helplessness of possibility and dismay. In simple terms the child always has two concurrent, overlapping projects: the project of self-sufficiency in which use of, and need for, the other is interpreted, by the child, as a concession; and a project of mutuality that owns up to a dependence. In the banal crisis of boredom, the conflict between the two projects is once again renewed. Is it not, indeed revealing, what the child's boredom evokes in the adults? Heard as a demand, sometimes as an accusation of failure or disappointment, it is rarely agreed to, simply acknowledged. How often, in fact, the child's boredom is met by that most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult's wish to distract him—as though the adults have decided that the child's life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting. It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him. Boredom is integral to the process of taking one's time.

While the child's boredom is often recognized as an incapacity, it is usually denied as an opportunity. A precociously articulate eleven-year-old boy was referred to me because, in his mother's words, he was "more miserable than he realized," and had no friends because of his "misleading self-presentation." For several weeks, while we got to know each other, he chatted fluently in a quite happy, slightly dissociated way about his vast array of interests and occupations. The only significant negative transference occurred when he mentioned, in passing, that he might sometimes be too busy to come and see me. He was mostly in a state of what I can only describe as blank exuberance about how full his life was. As he was terrified of his own self-doubt, I asked him very few questions, and they were always tactful. But at one point, more direct than I intended to be, I asked him if he was ever bored. He was surprised by the question and replied with a gloominess I hadn't seen before in this relentlessly cheerful child, "I'm not allowed to be bored." I asked him what would happen if he allowed himself to be bored, and he paused for the first time, I think, in the treatment, and said, "I wouldn't know what I was looking forward to," and was, momentarily, quite panic-stricken by this thought. This led us, over the next year, into a discussion of what in one language would be called this boy's false self. Being good, in terms of the maternal demand, was having lots of interests, interests, that is, of a respectable, unembarrassing sort, nothing that could make him feel awkward and strong. In the course of the treatment he gradually developed in himself a new capacity, the capacity to be bored. I once suggested to him that being good was a way of stopping people knowing him, to which he agreed but added, "When I'm bored I don't know myself!"

If the bored child cannot sufficiently hold the mood, or use the adult as an unimpinging auxiliary ego, there is a premature flight from uncertainty, the familiar orgy of promiscuous and disappointing engagements that is also, as it were, a trial action in action, a trying things out. At its worst there is what the adult will come to know, from his repertoire of displacements, as the simulation of his desire, which in the child often takes the

form of a regressive fabrication of need. A boy of eight referred for being "excessively greedy and always bored," said to me in the first session, "If I eat everything I won't have to eat anymore." This could have meant several things, but for him it meant then that if he could eat everything he would no longer need to be hungry. One magical solution, of course, to the problem of having been tantalized is to have no desire. For this boy greed was, among other things, an attack on the desiring part of the self, a wish to get to the end of his appetite and finish with it once and for all. Part of the total fantasy of greed is always the attempt to eat up one's own appetite. But for this desolate child greed was a form of self-cure for a malign boredom that continually placed him on the threshold of an emptiness, a lack, that he couldn't bear; an emptiness in which his own idiosyncratic, unconscious desire lurked as a possibility. When I asked him if he was ever lonely, he said that he was "too bored to be lonely."

> Inability to tolerate empty space limits the amount of space available.
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> W. R. Bion, *Cogitations*

The child is dependent not only on the mother, but also on his desire. Both can be lost and refound. So perhaps boredom is merely the mourning of everyday life? "It is really only because we know so well how to explain it," Freud wrote of mourning, "that this attitude does not seem to us pathological." But the child's boredom is a mood that seems to negate the possibility of explanation. It is itself unexplaining, inarticulate; certainly not pathological but nevertheless somehow unacceptable. Some of the things Freud says in *Mourning and Melancholia* about the melancholic can easily be said of the bored child. "One feels . . . a loss . . . has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either." What the bored child experiences himself as losing is "something to do" at the moment in which nothing is inviting.

"The inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us," Freud writes, "because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely." In a sense, the bored child is absorbed by his lack of absorption, and yet he is also preparing for something of which he is unaware, something that will eventually occasion an easy transition or a mild surprise of interest. "In mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." And in boredom, we might add, it is both. The brief but intense boredoms of childhood are reactive to no great loss, but are merely an interruption—after something and before something else. Like all genuine transitional states, their destination is unclear. Certainly when bored as an adult one cannot, in Freud's words, "hide the weakness of one's own nature."[1] But what, we might ask, following Freud's approach in this extraordinary paper, is the work which boredom performs for the child?

Winnicott, who often refers to instinctual life as a "complication," provides a way of looking at boredom in his paper "The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation" (1941), particularly with his notion of the period of hesitation, a state of preconscious surmise. In the set situation of Winnicott's consultation he asks "the mother to sit opposite me with the angle of the table coming between me and her, she sits down with the baby on her knee. As a routine I place a right-angled shining tongue-depressor at the edge of the table and I invite the mother to place the child in such a way that, if the child should wish to handle the spatula, it is possible." This sets the scene for the three stages of the infant's behavior that are to become for Winnicott a paradigm of the analytic process. The spatula, like the "good" interpretation, and even the analyst himself, is that which the patient is ready to use, that makes sense to him to use; and the setting is one in which the child "only becomes able to find his desire again in so far as his testing of the environment affords satisfactory results."[2] The bored child is waiting, without the conscious representation of an object, to find his desire again. Once again he does not know what he is looking forward to. This is Winnicott's description of part of the process:

Stage 1. The baby puts his hand to the spatula, but at this moment discovers unexpectedly that the situation must be given thought. He is in a fix. Either with his hand resting on the spatula and his body quite still he looks at me and his mother with big eyes, and watches and waits, or, in certain cases, he withdraws interest completely and buries his face in the front of his mother's blouse. It is usually possible to manage the situation so that active reassurance is not given, and it is very interesting to watch the gradual and spontaneous return of the child's interest in the spatula.

Stage 2. All the time, in "the period of hesitation" (as I call it), the baby holds his body still (but not rigid). Gradually he becomes brave enough to let his feelings develop, and then the picture changes quite quickly. The moment at which this first phase changes into the second is evident, for the child's acceptance of the reality of desire for the spatula is heralded by a change in the inside of the mouth, which becomes flabby, while the tongue looks thick and soft, and saliva flows copiously. Before long he puts the spatula into his mouth and is chewing it with his gums, or seems to be copying father smoking a pipe. The change in the baby's behaviour is a striking feature. Instead of expectancy and stillness there now develops self-confidence, and there is free bodily movement, the latter related to manipulation of the spatula.

I have frequently made the experiment of trying to get the spatula to the infant's mouth during the stage of hesitation. Whether the hesitation corresponds to my normal or differs from it in degree or quality, I find that it is impossible during this stage to get the spatula to the child's mouth apart from the exercise of brutal strength. In certain cases where the inhibition is acute any effort on my part that results in the spatula being moved towards the child produces screaming, mental distress, or actual colic.

The baby now seems to feel that the spatula is in his possession, perhaps in his power, certainly available for the purposes of self-expression.[3]

Clearly, for the bored child nothing is "available for the purposes of self-expression." Instead of "expectancy and stillness" there is a dreary agitation; instead of "self-confidence and . . . free bodily movement" there is a cramped restlessness. Boredom, one could say, is the set situation before there is a spatula to be found; or perhaps, more absurdly, a set situation full of spatulas in which the child has to find one that really appeals to him. The bored child, a sprawl of absent possibilities, is looking for something to hold his attention. He is like a man who walks as quickly as possible through a gallery until a picture actually arrests his attention, until he is stopped—and at that point, we might add, the transference has taken. For the child to be allowed to have what Winnicott calls "the full course of the experience" the child needs the use of an environment that will suggest things without imposing them; not preempt the actuality of the child's desire by force-feeding, not distract the child by forcing the spatula into his mouth. It is a process, Winnicott is saying, that is easily violated—although I would say that in growing up one needs a certain flair for distraction—and analogous to the analytic situation, in which the analyst's interpretations offer views rather than imposing convictions. In psychoanalysis, by definition, a militant or moralistic competence is inappropriate, merely a distraction.

The shining spatula, like Winnicott's initial squiggle, is, of course, an invitation to the child, an offering. What Winnicott calls the environment, though not exactly asserting itself, is at least tentatively promising; hinting, as it were. Gradually gaining interest in something that has attracted his attention, the infant, in his period of hesitation, "becomes brave enough to let his feelings develop." The period, wonderfully observed and imagined by Winnicott, in which the infant begins to experience his desire is an intrinsically problematic, difficult time. A child described later in the paper gets asthma during the period of hesitation. "For this child," Winnicott writes, "asthma was associated with the moment at which there is normally hesitation, and hesitation implies mental conflict."[4] One can ask then, adapting Freud's phrase, What are the individual's preconditions

for desire, for letting his feelings develop? What are the situations he sets—the occasions he organizes—to make desire possible? Boredom, of course, is prehesitation, but in each period of boredom the child returns to these questions.

The ordinary boredom of childhood is the benign version of what gets acted out, or acted out of, in what Winnicott calls the antisocial tendency.[5] But as adults boredom returns us to the scene of inquiry, to the poverty of our curiosity, and the simple question, What does one want to do with one's time? What is a brief malaise for the child becomes for the adult a kind of muted risk. After all, who can wait for nothing?

> Clov: Do you believe in the life to come?
> Hamm: Mine was always that.
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> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

In the process of waiting for the mother the child discovers a capacity for representation as a means of deferral. Representation—fantasy—is the medium in which he desires and waits. The child can conceive of himself, as a desiring subject, in her absence, only in the space that comes between them. Optimally, with the cumulative experience of waiting for a reliable mother the child will confidently find himself as the source of possibilities; and he will be relatively unembittered by his gradual pre-oedipal disillusionment and loss of omnipotence. What Melanie Klein has described as the paranoid-schizoid position[6] may be simply an account of the state of mind of an infant who has been made to wait beyond his capacity or tolerance, to the point at which desire is experienced intrapsychically as a threat to the always precarious integrity of the ego. What Klein does reveal, following Freud, is what could be called the individual's will to substitution, the need for every absence to be a presence. For the infant, in the agonies of waiting indefinitely, the good breast turns into the bad persecuting breast, but is nevertheless present as such in the infant's mind. In Klein's developmental theory, therefore, the whole notion of waiting is being rethought because, in a sense, the infant is never alone. Without

sufficient attentiveness by the mother there is to an excessive degree what Laplanche so starkly describes, in a different context, as an attack of the drives on the ego;[7] which will become, through projection, a refusal of the eventual presence of the object. It is difficult to enjoy people for whom we have waited too long. And in this familiar situation, which evokes such intensities of feeling, we wait and we try to do something other than waiting, and we often get bored—the boredom of protest that is always a screen for rage.

One can, of course, distract oneself only from what one has seen, or imagines one has seen. The defenses, as Freud described them, are forms of recognition, instruments for the compromising of knowledge. We can think of boredom as a defense against waiting, which is, at one remove, an acknowledgment of the possibility of desire. And we can use as an analogy here Freud's explanation of the double-think in fetishism from his paper of 1927. After the child has been confronted with the fact that, as he understands it, the woman lacks a penis, "we see," Freud writes, "that the perception has persisted, and that a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal." The child "has retained that belief but he has also given it up"; like the patient Freud mentions, he "oscillates . . . between two assumptions."[8] In boredom, we can also say, there are two assumptions, two impossible options: there is something I desire, and there is nothing I desire. But which of the two assumptions, or beliefs, is disavowed is always ambiguous, and this ambiguity accounts, I think, for the curious paralysis of boredom (it is worth remembering Joyce McDougall's sense of disavowal, that it "implies the notion of 'avowal' followed by a destruction of meaning").[9] In boredom there is the lure of a possible object of desire, and the lure of the escape from desire, of its meaninglessness.

In this context what begins for the child as the object of desire becomes, for the adult, what Christopher Bollas has described as the "transformational object." Initially the mother, it is "an object that is experientially identified by the infant with the process of the alteration of self experience." This earliest

relationship becomes the precursor of, the paradigm for, "the person's search for an object (a person, place, event, ideology) that promises to transform the self." At the first stage "the mother is not yet identified as an object but is experienced as a process of transformation, and this feature remains in the trace of this object-seeking in adult life, where I believe the object is sought for its function as signifier of the process of transformation of being. Thus, in adult life, the quest is not to possess the object; it is sought in order to surrender to it as a process that alters the self."[10] But just as, for example, we cannot know beforehand which of the day's events from what Freud calls the "dream-day" will be used as day-residues in the dream-work, we cannot necessarily know what will serve as a transformational object. The fact that anything *might* serve to transform a person's life has extravagant consequences for the possible shapes of a life, and, of course, for the significance attributed to therapeutic interventions. We are drawn, in fact, to ask a brash question: a madeleine or an analyst? An analysis can at least be arranged. But it cannot, alas, organize epiphanies, or guarantee those processes of transformation—those articulations—that return the future to us through the past. Of our own past, Proust writes in *Swann's Way* (1913), "It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves die."[11] The past can also, as we know, be hidden in the transference, and so can appear to be hidden in that material object called the analyst. But can we believe that there is a royal road, so to speak, to the transformational object?

Boredom, I think, protects the individual, makes tolerable for him the impossible experience of waiting for something without knowing what it could be. So the paradox of the waiting that goes on in boredom is that the individual does not know what he was waiting for until he finds it, and that often he

does not know that he is waiting. One could, in this sense, speak of the "analytic attitude" as an attentive boredom. With his set of approximations the bored individual is clueless and mildly resentful, involved in a halfhearted, despondent search for something to do that will make a difference.

Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but of the boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis; and this, we can say, is integral to the function of boredom as a kind of blank condensation of psychic life. In that more ordinary, more fleeting, boredom of the child the waiting is repressed. The more common risk for the adult—less attended to, more set in his ways, than the child—is that the boredom will turn into waiting. That the individual will become "brave enough to let his feelings develop" in the absence of an object—toward a possible object, as it were—and by doing so commit himself, or rather, entrust himself, to the inevitable elusiveness of that object. For the adult, it seems, boredom needs to be the more permanent suspended animation of desire. Adulthood, one could say, is when it begins to occur to you that you may not be leading a charmed life.