

Peter Womack 

Experience

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, set up by Boris Johnson in reaction to Black Lives Matter, got a hostile reception when it reported in 2021. For instance, Halima Begum of the Runnymede Trust remarked:

I'm absolutely flabbergasted to see the slave trade apparently redefined as 'the Caribbean Experience', as though it's something Thomas Cook should be selling—a one-way shackled cruise to purgatory.¹

She was referring to a sentence in the Foreword by the Commission's Chair Tony Sewell. Reflecting on the way Black British history is taught, he argued that it concentrates too exclusively on the rapacity of the slave traders and the victimhood of the enslaved. As an alternative,

There is a new story about the Caribbean experience which speaks to the slave period not only being about profit and suffering but how culturally African people transformed themselves into a remodelled African/Britain.²

Sewell's reference to 'the Caribbean experience' was certainly tone-deaf, but he surely did not intend the appalling connotation registered by Begum. Rather, he was seeking to represent the slave trade and its consequences as multifaceted: the enslaved Africans and their descendants were not only victims but also active makers of their own history; the islands were not only labour camps but also centres of a distinctive culture; and so on. To avoid foreclosing this ambivalence, he wanted a non-judgmental term that would gesture towards the whole diverse history of the relations between Britain, Africa and the Caribbean, and the one he came up with was 'experience'. Unfortunately, recent shifts within that word had opened up a sort of crevasse, and he fell into it.

What were these subterranean movements? Any attempt to tell the story of a politically charged word is conceptually indebted to Raymond

Williams, so it is appropriate, if ironic, to begin this story with him. In his critical prose ‘experience’ has a distinctive *gravitas*—what he himself might have called its *necessary* quality. In *The Long Revolution* (1961), he reflects on the uncertain state of the English novel:

When it is put to me that the realist tradition has broken down, it is this mature viewpoint that I see as having been lost, under new pressures of particular experience.³

Tracing the same issues back into the nineteenth century at the opening of *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970), he contemplates the extraordinary cluster of great novels that appeared in 1847–1848 and comments:

Here, in these hands, a generation of writers, in very different ways, found the common forms that mattered, in response to a new and varied but still common experience.⁴

The context in both these places is a judgment about literature, and ‘experience’ refers to what is *prior* to literature: a genre changes under the pressure of experience or a common experience prompts writers to develop new forms. Articulating the relationship between experience and literary form is never simple, always open to exploratory reformulation. But the underlying condition of the exploration *is* quite simple: it is that experience is what is there first, before it is represented or expressed. Take another polemical voice from the 1960s:

[T]he language with which I had grown up had certainly not been the King’s English. An immense experience had forged this language; it had been (and remains) one of the tools of a people’s survival, and it revealed expectations which no white American could easily entertain.⁵

This is James Baldwin, reflecting on the English spoken by Black Americans. Here language, like literature, is a secondary phenomenon; it is crucially significant, to be sure, but it still derives that significance from its relationship with a prior reality, and the name for the prior reality is, again, ‘experience’.

That placing does not explain, though, what qualifies this particular word for its ordinary function. Simply to define it as ‘what is there first’ is too austere schematic; it makes it sound as if the word is a sort of philosopher’s placeholder, like ‘being’ or ‘the real’, handily designating

a conceptual requirement but intrinsically empty. But the word itself doesn't work like that at all. Together with its cognates such as 'experiment' or 'expert', it implies practical content, the very reverse of abstraction. And because it is a verb as well as a noun, it foregrounds a subjective process—that is, 'experience' is not simply stuff that is out there, it is what somebody *experiences*, which means that it becomes part of who they are. Hence its characteristic Leavisite collocates: *lived, felt*. These draw out the implication that experience is more than an idea—that, on the contrary, the use of the word amounts to an assertion that cultural forms are traces of real, substantial lives. Arguably, it was this materialistic dimension that aligned the usage, roughly and broadly, with the political left. Certainly that contributes to its force in Baldwin's context, and (as a feeble echo) in Sewell's.

'Experience', then, is in a position of what might be called ontological privilege. That is, whereas an ordinary proposition can be queried, denied, amended or disagreed with, experience is unquestionable. It is not a statement of fact or opinion. It is more like a sprained ankle or a thunderstorm, something that cannot be refuted because it is not a discursive form but an event. So my experience is inherently valid; it is not negotiable, it is what I just know.

It is therefore authoritative, and anyone who has been exposed to contemporary communications knows what an organisation sounds like when it is deferring to the authority. For example:

You are receiving this invitation because you recently arranged to have a COVID-19 test. As part of our service, we are constantly seeking to improve the testing experience that we provide. We are asking you to complete a short survey to share your views about the test you have had.⁶

What makes it so dispiriting, even painful, to encounter this locution? I think three different aspects can be distinguished. The first is simply that it has become so ubiquitous so quickly. Tourist venues offer pop-up food experiences; social media platforms labour to improve the user experience; galleries invite visitors not merely to look at pictures but to experience them; an agency for plumbers and electricians aspires 'to build an extensive service community known for providing excellent experiences'.⁷ Suddenly, as if in conformity with a memo from some hidden executive, everybody seems to be wearing the same verbal tie; the effect is creepy and slightly intimidating.

Secondly, the expression is marked by a rather ludicrous grandiloquence. To take a COVID-19 test, you go to a testing centre, stick a swab

up your nose, put it in a bag and hand it in. To characterise this procedure as ‘the testing experience’ accords it a dignity which its immediate details don’t quite justify. I recently stayed in a hotel which invited patrons to post online reviews, and came upon one that read: ‘The breakfast let our exsperiance down it was like some of it was cold.’ This makes it sound as if there is more at stake than just the temperature of the coffee or the eggs; what matters is the integrity of the whole thing, which is in danger of being betrayed by failures in its constituent parts. Even the misspelling is suggestive—the reviewer seems not to own the crucial term normally or comfortably, but to have borrowed it from a language with more cultural power, like a medieval litigant resorting to Latin.

This pretentiousness corresponds to quite specific developments within organisations. About 5 years ago, my own university department, like most others, created the role of Associate Dean for Student Experience; the job description of this person includes chairing the department’s Student Experience Group and representing the department on the University’s Student Experience Committee. This mutually defining network of committees and roles is itself a response to government initiatives which make the university’s funding conditional on its providing a satisfactory ‘student experience’. Once those with financial power have nominated this experience as decisive, it becomes natural to make it the content of somebody’s job, and then, equally naturally, the dialect of the institution shifts in order to promote the dignity and importance of that content. This logic is not peculiar to higher education. The National Trust’s senior management team, for example, includes a Visitor Experience Director. In the wider online marketplace, it is easy to find a platform that ‘helps organizations deliver enhanced social media experiences’ and another that offers a complete suite of ‘experience management’ software, applying a common methodology to managing the experiences of consumers, employees and partners.⁸ And so on, always with an accompanying procession of conferences, training programmes, professional associations and in-house journals. ‘Experience’ is not just a word for something that happens to us; it is also the title of something that increasing numbers of people do for a living, and it is *their* professional aspirations that are expressed by the uneasily self-important tone in which it is uttered.

Thirdly, the locution is unhappy because it is fraudulent. The vital thing about my experience, it tells me, is precisely that it is mine, and nobody else’s. It is unique, inalienable, incomparable: that is the source of its authority. But then for just that reason, the other party to the transaction—the salesman, the university, the State—has a motive to

make my experience as rewarding and persuasive as possible. So ‘experience’ becomes the object of an elaborate programme of design, adjustment, monitoring and—precisely—comparative assessment. The contradiction is comically on view, for instance, in the advertising copy for ‘Virgin Experience Days’, a division of the Virgin group that sells special treats to the affluent—balloon flights, wild life safaris, and the like. Rather sententiously, it explains that experiences offer a higher gratification than possessions because they are more personal. For instance:

Part of the beauty of experiences is that you can’t compare them: they are unique to you. Take the thrill of a helicopter buzz flight (9,500 Virgin Points)—that’s all yours; no one else will experience it as you do. The same goes for a South African luxury safari (reward flights from 25,000+ points).⁹

But a scale of prices, whatever else it does, forms a mechanism for assimilating disparate values to a uniform standard of comparison. You can see at a glance how special one unique experience is when compared to the unique experience next to it. In this way, selling an experience negates exactly the quality that is being sold.

Even so, the word is not a simple reflex of cynicism or dishonesty; it draws its force (and its ubiquity) from deeper roots than that. Take one of Virgin’s ruthlessly stereotyped ‘experiences’: the English Pub. Years ago when I lived in Manchester and drove quite often to London, I used to break the journey home at a pub in a small town in Derbyshire. It was a few miles off the M1, and the interior decor must have predated the motorway. There was no music; apart from slow-moving conversation, the only sounds were a clock ticking and the rustle of the open fire. There were shiny black benches and settles, rag rugs on a slate floor, lampshades with pink roses, two or three bitters on hand pump. I remember sitting, sipping and consciously feeling the harsh rhythms of motorway driving quieten down inside me. When I took my detour along country roads to find this place instead of going straight home, what was I after? Not just the beer, not the people (I knew no one in the town), not the picturesque (the place was pretty enough, but on the occasions I’m recalling it was dark by the time I got there). If you needed one word to cover the whole cluster of pleasures, sensations and associations, you could say that I went there for the experience.

That was in the 1970s, and I have not been back since. Naturally, I wonder what it is like now, and that question, even unanswered, raises some of the awkward issues that surround ‘experience’ as such. Perhaps it has changed completely—that would not be surprising or interesting.

But what if I were to go there tomorrow and find that everything was just the same? *That* would mean, I think inescapably, that a landlord or manager had noticed that the experience I have described was a pleasant and valuable one and had set out to ensure that the pub continued to provide it: to refuse to install a sound system, to repaint the wooden stools with fresh black gloss, to comb ‘preloved’ websites for thirties rugs and lampshades, all in the name of—what? an aesthetic conception of the pub, a consistent *design* of the experience of visiting it. In short, to conceive of a given ensemble of impressions as an ‘experience’ is to create the conditions for fabricating it. The word ‘experience’ robs it of its innocent, just-there immediacy, and turns it into a sort of mise-en-scène. But in that case what do we call the true object, the thing that first exists and then is falsified? Well, ‘experience’ is the word for that too. The experience is the original *and* the fake.

Notes

- 1 *The Guardian*, 31.3.21
- 2 *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report* (2021), p. 8.
- 3 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 305.
- 4 Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 10.
- 5 James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 67.
- 6 Email from Test and Trace, 25/09/2021.
- 7 ‘Pimlico Plumbers sold to US firm Neighborly’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58632984>, 20 September 2021.
- 8 ‘Hootsuite’ and ‘Qualtrics’.
- 9 <https://www.virgin.com/about-virgin/latest/why-experiences-make-us-happiest-in-life-and-how-to-make-the-most-of-them>

Author Biography

Peter Womack is an Emeritus Professor of Literature and Drama at the University of East Anglia. His notes on the political uses of words have been appearing in *Critical Quarterly* since July 2021.