



Eva Ferry

## Eight Exercises About the Past

### **NUMBER ONE**

#### THE EXERCISE

Sit in front of a person. Observe them carefully day by day until they die.

#### AIM

The aim of this exercise is to capture the moment of change. When does something turn into something else—all that. (Everyone knows what change is.)

#### INSTRUCTIONS

Do it first with a person you care about.

Then do it with a person you don't care about.

(It is possible to reverse the steps, although we don't necessarily recommend it.)

#### HELP, SUGGESTIONS

For God's sake, don't focus on the gray hairs popping up, the wrinkles surfacing, all that (we mean the sort of thing authors of an unremarkable intelligence would wax lyrical about, only to conclude that he/she is more handsome/beautiful now that his/her hair carries more gray because it's all about maturity, etc.).

We repeat: focus on change—we mean real change. Changes in the patterns of speech, in the shape of the hands—these are all rubbish. We repeat: we are after real change.

Diagrams, color codes might help—we want to arrive at some synthesis, emerge with something we can talk to people about, don't we (and by the way this applies to all exercises). This is very personal. We do not want to prescribe what you should do to track change. We don't like prescribing, generally.

### SUBSTITUTIONS

You can try tomatoes instead of people.

This is not meant to be a shortcut, by the way. You need to find a tomato that you care about. Then things do get easier. Is there anything more similar to a person than a tomato as he/she changes? We don't think so.

### **EXERCISE 2**

#### THE EXERCISE

Reconstruct something to perfection.

Once you're finished, proclaim, as loudly as you can: "WE'RE NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF RECONSTRUCTION."

#### IDEAS OF THINGS TO RECONSTRUCT

A building; a street; any kind of object, anything that takes up space; a way of doing (e.g. performing music, standing, thinking, writing, bringing up a child, taking care of a pet, baking, sewing); a day in the life of; an hour in the life of; the life of.

#### COUNTER-RECOMMENDATIONS

We do not recommend reconstructing things that have only existed inside people's heads, e.g. as platonic ideals (don't reconstruct *the* regency table, reconstruct *this or that* regency table). It's not because it's impossible to verify whether you're doing it right. It's mostly because it tends

to get tedious after a while (all of this ‘getting inside people’s heads’: really).<sup>1</sup>

#### CLARIFICATION

When we say ‘proclaim loudly’—we don’t necessarily mean it literally. There are other forms of proclaiming loudly. Reconstruct the hanging gardens of Babylon, then imprint graffiti all over it: **WE ARE NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF RECONSTRUCTION**. This has been done, we hear, to great effect a couple of times. Of course it can be done more modestly—reconstruct, say, a charming Romanesque church, that’s always a success.

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<sup>1</sup> To reconstruct a dead language and then proclaim in that same language: **WE ARE NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF RECONSTRUCTION** is not recommended either. Comes across as pretentious and spoils the whole thing. But, by all means, do reconstruct a dead language for this exercise; it’s one of the most rewarding options - just don’t use it to make the proclamation at the end. Languages still to be reconstructed include: Abishira, Acroá, Aguano, Aribwatsa, Bactrian and its dialects, Barbacoas (not to be confused with Barbareño, which someone has already reconstructed for this exercise), Chorasmian, Cotoname, Curimian, Dacian, Dalmatian. (reconstruct the native language of Diocletian, who could resist), Emoc, Esuman, Faliscan, Gabrielino-Fernandeño, Galician, Gaulish (Cisalpine or Trasalpine), Ghomara, Gothic, Guanche, Hernican, Iberian, Karipuna, Katabaga, Lepontic, Ligurian, Mbara, Median, Miami, Moabite, Mozarabic, Narrinyeri, Ofo, Omurano, Oscan, Old Ossetic, Paelignian, Parthian, Pictish, Pijao, Pisidian, Polabian, Qatabanian, Samaritan, Selian, Sicaniian, Sogdian, Tartessian, Tutelo, Ugaritic, Umbrian, Vandalic, Volscian, Wariyanga, Zemgalian.

### **EXERCISE 3**

#### **THE EXERCISE**

Pick up something, anything<sup>2</sup>, and texture it.

#### **RATIONALE**

Because the past has often arrived at us in a strangely untextured version.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

(This can be especially useful for lovers of the Antique and Medieval periods, as these eras particularly have arrived to us depleted of their texture. The older a thing the less texture it keeps, etc.)

### **EXERCISE 4**

#### **THE EXERCISE**

Go to sleep.

Do not wake up until you have had a dream that you can regard as having possibly been, at some point in time, prophetic of the situation the world is in now.

#### **CLARIFICATIONS**

You ask us ‘What is the situation of the world now?’ Don’t. Make an effort. Do.

Don’t wake up until you’ve had the dream. Don’t worry, you’ll know when you’ve had it. A bit like an orgasm, if we’re allowed to be daring like that.

Though we can offer the following advice from the classics:

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<sup>2</sup> Texturing a capital is always a good idea. Also: margins; doors; hems of clothes; the bezel of a watch.

(Just go crazy, I mean you have to go crazy for this to really work. Otherwise what’s the point. If you don’t go crazy this exercise won’t work. Don’t even try. Don’t waste your time. No really.)

Texture a bourdon too. This in medieval or folk music is a long, sustained note that runs underneath any given melody, one of the oldest forms of harmony. Texture the bourdon by breaking it up into smaller notes, etc.

a) The dreams of the morning and those of the third watch are more likely to be it (*Odyssey*, IV, 81).

b) Don't sleep on your back or your right side (Tertullian, *De anima*, 48).

c) Don't eat beans before going to sleep (Pythagoras?).

d) A range of amulets can be worn. We don't know what this entails.

### EXAMPLE

I once dreamed of a woman, face framed by a perfectly cut black bob—perfectly cut, perfectly black. In the dream she stood next to me and gesticulated, and after a while her face turned into an otter's (still under the perfectly cut, perfectly black bob), and in the dream you knew that it was the force of her facial muscles in her angry gesticulations that turned her into an otter.

I thought that this dream could have been at some point prophetic of the world as it is now. Others will disagree.

(This wasn't, I suppose, technically a dream, because I wasn't really sleeping, I was dozing on a plane as it prepared to take off because I had to run through the terminal to catch the plane, so I was exhausted and sleep-deprived, and just dozed off, and at that moment between sleep and consciousness I saw this woman-otter, or otter-woman, standing next to me on the plane all of a sudden. So maybe it wasn't a dream after all. But you see my point.)

### **EXERCISE 5**

#### THE EXERCISE

Build a perfectly good life for yourself, then walk away and never be seen again.

(This is one of those exercises where you wish time travel had been invented. BUT).

#### NOTA BENE

Now this is, in a way, a classic. Martin Guerre, Louis Le Prince, Ettore Majorana,

Laozi, Legio IX Hispana, James Harrod, Khachatur Abovian. Versions of it proliferate in newspapers, Sunday supplements, novels, films. It makes the cliché detector ping every time, doesn't it? But still. This is why there is only one right way of doing this exercise, although we wouldn't normally encourage such a thing. And here it is: Don't leave your perfectly good life out of disappointment, dissatisfaction, tedium, boredom, rebellion. Leave it at its highest point, leave it only when you're perfectly satisfied with it.

Normally for these exercises we advocate freedom and autonomy, but we make an exception with this one.

### **EXERCISE 6**

#### **THE EXERCISE**

Draw a painting on the theme:

**MY FAVOURITE PERSON FROM THE PAST**

### **EXERCISE 7**

#### **THE EXERCISE**

Take a notebook.

See how many generations you can fill it with.

#### **ACCOMPANYING NOTES**

This isn't about whoever fits in the most generations wins. No, these exercises are not about that.

The simple way to do this is to follow the Bible, and that's the method some of us recommend:

Jechonias begat Salathiel; and Salathiel begat Zorobabel; And Zorobabel begat Abiud; and Abiud begat Eliakim; and Eliakim begat Azor; And Azor begat Sadoc; and Sadoc begat Achim; and Achim begat Eliud; And Eliud begat Eleazar; and Eleazar begat Matthan; and Matthan begat Jacob, etc.

Others among us, though, favor a florid approach:

Jechonias begat Salathiel. Salathiel graduated in Physics and Metaphysics from the University of Marmaduke, enjoyed playing badminton on a Wednesday evening, at 47 he conquered Echbatana and its surroundings. Salathiel begat Zorobabel. Zorobabel enjoyed his job as a web designer, went to Coptic evening classes on a Thursday evening, lived through the changes that meant a comfortable middle-class existence was not a viable option anymore except for a chosen few. Zorobabel begat Abiud, etc.

When we say ‘fill a notebook with generations’, we don’t necessarily mean you have to write or draw.

Here’s an idea: Homer and the generations and the leaves, a notebook is full of leaves.

## **EXERCISE 8**

### **THE EXERCISE**

Write a history of art (any art), or several arts, through a genealogy of artists who shared the same first name.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

Including photographs or pictures can be a good idea, if you’re after a certain effect, i.e. people exclaiming as they flick through your history: Oh but she doesn’t look like an Edith (on Edith Södergren; Edith Wharton, Nesbitt, Piaf, all look like Ediths). Or: With that face, he couldn’t be anything but a Charles (the sort of thing you would never say of, for example, Charles Dickens but would probably say of, for example, Charles Mingus).

You don’t need to include pictures. In fact, it’s better not if you aren’t pursuing the above effect: it is, we fear, unavoidable.

### **EXAMPLE**

Gustav makes a good example, and it is so because it’s a name that seemed to be very

popular one time but now it's all gone. All gone. Do you know any Gustav (Gustave, Gustavo, Gustaf)? We categorically don't. Yet part of the history of the Western arts has G for Gustav all over it. (Doré, Eiffel, Mahler, Moreau, Flaubert, Klimt, Holst, Leonhardt). And don't forget the minor figures, because your history will need some minor figures for the exercise to be really worth it. Take for example Gustavo Pittaluga, composer, turned diplomat for the Spanish Republic at war, turned composer again in exile (Cuba, Mexico, the United States, Argentina). His friend Gustavo Durán, composer turned captain for the Spanish Republic at war, then turned diplomat and night-time composer in exile.

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