AGORAPHOBIA: An Alphabet

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Agoraphobia is alternately defined as a fear of open spaces, fear of public places, and a fear of crowds. The DSM IV defines it as “Anxiety about being in places or situations from which escape might be difficult (or embarrassing) or in which help may not be available in the event of having an unexpected or situationally predisposed Panic Attack or panic-like symptoms. Agoraphobic fears typically involve characteristic clusters of situations that include being outside the home alone; being in a crowd or standing in a line; being on a bridge; and travelling in a bus, train, or automobile.” Given the apparent conflict—how might a fear of open places be the same thing as a fear of places filled?—the concept is as dizzying as the vertigo that often accompanies the phenomenon, and indeed was its primary means of definition in its earliest codification. In the spirit of the vertiginous, what follows is an alphabet of agoraphobia, which has the benefit of order, but one stripped of resolution’s banalities. Each letter of the alphabet has one or more entries, some purely textual, and many involving images, each resonant with some aspect of the fear of public places. With apologies to Gustave Flaubert, Ambrose Bierce, and Edward Gorey.
A IS FOR

Agora. The public meeting space in ancient Greece, located in the center of the polis. An open-air gathering spot for assembly or markets. The etymological basis of “agoraphobia.”

Allegory. Etymologically, wandering outside of narrative. Experientially, talking without being understood by one’s fellow citizens. See Tenure.

Altamont. The worst rock concert ever. A projected audience of a hundred thousand, with three hundred thousand showing up. In 1969, in a free concert outside of San Francisco, arranged with twenty-four-hour notice at the Altamont Motor Speedway, members of the Hell’s Angels, hired to provide security, murdered an eighteen-year-old black man as the Rolling Stones performed onstage. Crowd control gone very bad—notable in that the crowd was not responsible, whereas those hired to control it were.


Atget, Eugène. Failed actor/Premier photographer of interiors and exteriors, ignoring all that falls between.
Crowds at political rallies make me weep. For this to occur, however, two conditions must be met. First I myself have to be in the crowd. Second, the speaker cannot be an ordinary secessionist scumbag like Umberto Bossi, but must be a true political hero who is concerned with real ways and real means to turn our terrible world into a much better place to live. He must demand a fairer distribution of wealth and the public ownership of the means of production (when the products are of public interest). He does not have to go all out and ask for the abolition of the military or maintain, in fact, that the whole idea of defense is for the birds (for the cats, fat cats?). If he were to do that, he would not have much of an audience (yes, I know, a crowd) to address. So I put up with that omission on account of its structural relevance.

As a young man I was very fond of Pietro Nenni, the Secretary of the Italian Socialist Party which, in my days, was a Marxist party. The difference from the Communist Party was that the Socialists expected to implement socialism democratically, through persuasion and parliamentary action. The Communists, on the other hand, kept talking about the need to bring about change in a revolutionary fashion, although they knew full well that they would not. In fact, in later years, under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer, whom I also came to admire, the Italian Communist Party shifted gear and introduced the idea of entrepreneurship (in the public sphere). In the end, strange as it may seem, it became the first Communist Party to call itself Marxist and democratic. Which, in my view, is better and by far more plausible, than “revolutionary and institutional,” an oxymoron that did not do much for the welfare of Mexico, where it was conceived.

The official avowal of the democratic process did not result in a merger with the Socialists, as it perhaps should have, simply because in the meantime the Socialists had become downright capitalists and practiced with a vengeance what they had not preached: namely, the somewhat controversial doctrine of private profit and public losses. But to go back to Nenni: in terms of my weeping, he was better than any child lost in the crowd as shown today on TV, even when the child is Indian and his mother and father realize they lost him after days of bathing in the holy waters of the Ganges River.
In fact Nenni was impeccable. He never failed me. He was not a handsome man and spoke with a distinct vernacular accent. But he was “erotic” as Socrates was “erotic,” according to Alcibiades. Or so I like to think of him in retrospect. He had guts. Life dealt with him shabbily; he lost a daughter in a Nazi concentration camp, spent years in exile, saw his own party, which he loved dearly, become a boisterous gang of profiteers. His political passion never flickered, however, and he was no cheat. Quite the opposite: a superbly honest man who viewed politics as a noble art (like fist-fighting, I suppose), or at least an honest craft: some know how to make boats, some know how to make laws that are just.

He spoke of the necessity of nationalizing energy-related industries—and it was good to hear him say so in front of thousands of people in Piazza del Duomo, the same spot where, in 1932, Mussolini had promised every Italian family a house made from good stone, only to deliver the entire city to the Nazis eleven years later. It was then that my grandmother blurted out, after days (weeks in fact) of silence, that even among the Nazis you could find fellows who were not as bad as we made them out to be, notwithstanding the number of her relatives and friends they had been beaten to a pulp or sent on to greener pastures. Which goes to show how powerful denials can be.

In view of the mnemonic traces left in me by such complications, it felt good to hear Nenni, who must have been my grandmother’s age, speak in one sweep of nationalization and ethics. And the good feeling remained with me and many other members of the crowd, even when it became clear that the transfer from private to public hands would cost Italy a pretty penny. Actually, I never understood why we could not just confiscate the whole damn thing. Why was it necessary to buy back what we had already paid for a thousand times over, every month, when the gas bill came, and the electricity bill came, and the god-knows-what bill came . . . and we paid. Well, we paid again. The only thing Nenni failed to tell us (or did he tell us and we forgot?) was that, after all this, nationalized electricity was going to cost more than before. But hey, what the heck, isn’t a good weeping session worth more than any rate increase? Increase is actually a good thing, according to Shakespeare anyway. It is exactly what he says he desires to receive from the fairest of creatures . . . Eugenicist, that he was.

At any rate, the only way to avoid that increase could have come from the practice of honesty, which, in turn, is predicated on self-esteem—a very rare quality anywhere, and sorely lacking, I mean invisible, in people affected by a syndrome called public employment. It is much simpler to claim rights than to endorse duties. The claiming of rights, however, is a thing a crowd does very well also. Anti-leftist groups knew it and used to mock us with the following anecdote. Nenni (or any other leftist leader, for that matter) would ask his audience (yes, I know, his crowd):
“Do you care for bread?” The crowd thunders back: “Yes!” Leader: “Do you care for wine?” Crowd: “Yes!” Leader: “Do you care for work?” Crowd (chanting the opening words of the Italian Communist Anthem): “Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa . . . (Go forward people, wake up, wake up) / “Bandiera rossa, bandiera rossa” (Red flag, red flag), and so on. All this in the early 1960s, when an experimental poet could bask in the idea of being a revolutionary of sorts.

Nenni died quietly on January 1, 1980. By then his party was securely in the hands of Bettino Craxi (Nenni’s own “dauphin” believe it or not) who would make the Socialist Party the necessary pivot of Italian politics, only to bury its glorious century-long history in a grave of scandals and corruption. Years earlier I had moved further to the left and lived in a state of velleity and confusion: a side effect of being frequently surrounded by crowds. My political passion peaked in the mid-1970s with a dastardly denunciation of literature as bourgeois art and the equation of poetry with silence (Nietzsche came to the rescue in the late 1970s and early 1980s). In the meantime, however, I had wept a few times listening to Enrico Berlinguer. Frail and unassuming as he was (communist mothers had a ball with him), he had a sensational sense of rhythm and could quote—although at times he misquoted—big shot literary types, including Dante, who remains to date a great crowd pleaser and the most profitable of all Italian industries. I remember in particular a speech he delivered in 1975, at the newly built (a true engineering feat) Palazzo dello Sport (Sports Arena) the construction of which had been fiercely opposed by the Milanese section of the Communist Party (they changed their mind when they realized that Comrade Berlinguer was going to talk there). I believe that by then electricity had either been returned to private hands, or was going to be, shortly. Virtually all that had been nationalized reverted back to private hands. But the purchase this time was far less expensive. What was being bought, we were told, were money-losing concerns. The problem, this time, was a scandal named after the Lockheed Corporation. An ethical issue once again, but of a slightly different nature. Some prominent deputies from the Christian Democratic Party had pocketed vast sums of money, hiking the price of airplane engines delivered to the Italian government by the American company. Something like that. Some of the same people were also involved in petroleum-related scandals. All in all, Berlinguer knew what he was talking about and successfully portrayed the Italian Communist Party as the only ethically reliable political organization left in the country. When he explained to the audience—a multitude of card-carrying, well behaved, petit-bourgeois communists, and sympathizers—how Italy could be saved from the rapacious talons of those Christian Democratic vultures, whose thieving vocation was beyond dispute and made nineteenth-century robber barons look like archangels, the response was not just tears of happiness (on my part), but votes: the PCI got 35 percent of the national ballots, more than any other party—and it scared the hell of out of Uncle Sam. Upon exiting the Arena, sobbing with delight,
I was introduced to the secretary of a local Communist cell who, having learnt that I lived mostly in America, promptly produced a handkerchief, unfolded and waved it at me: clearly, he did not intend to dry my tears with it, but rather to dispel the symbolic stench emanating from my compromised persona.

Things became complicated after that. Negotiations between Christian Democrats and democratic Communists were severely boycotted and came to a halt with the Moro affair. I stopped weeping, began to do some serious teaching and went back to poetry. Nowadays to reach that emotional level, in which rage and feeling sorry for myself mix again and ward off any fear of death, I go to rallies against the war in Iraq, where crowds however are much thinner than those I seem to remember. You see, I can only love causes once I know they are lost. It’s my way of behaving like a tragic hero. Italian style, naturally. As an Italian I do not have to sport a stiff upper lip.

New York, December 2003
As far back as I go in my memory, the “events of May,” which as far as the Latin Quarter is concerned I prefer to call, with Edgar Morin, “the student commune,” are not identified with the crowd, in the sense of the enormous, powerful, at times formidable mass of people assembled at one protest; they remind me of something more discreet and more quotidian: the feeling of a period of liberty and engagement when the city was more fraternal, dreams more captivating, passers-by and fellow travelers in the bus and the metro suddenly attentive to each other. Edgar Morin’s formulation comprises a portion of the explanation: for several brief weeks “the student commune” incarnated students’ desire to substitute for the current state of things a sort of ideal and deliberative city, where discussion, vote, and protest are a means of recovering the festal and poetic base of democratic invention. Certainly there have been other student movements in the world, but the Parisian events have a specificity which has to do with the architectural frame of the city, with its memory of revolutionary days, and with the place of intellectuals and students in the city. The Algerian War, not so distant, had revealed the violence of colonial warfare to draftees and had allowed students allied to intellectuals and to a party of “forces of the Left” to weigh in on the issue of combat and of the future of the Republic.

The spirit of May draws from the experience of the war in Algeria, the influence of Sartrean engagement, and the repertory of a social contestation combining anti-colonial themes with a critique of the dominant classes. There are many meanings of the word “crowds” (“foules”), and one could first say that there were crowds of students in Paris (“il y avait foule d’étudiants à Paris”). Not in the sense of masses: students were not dominant in the population of Paris, but they were already much more numerous than ten years earlier, more determined and, especially, hardened in their critique of society. The “situationists” of Strasbourg and the students of Nanterre organized parodic actions, disruptions, and strikes. The occupation of the counsel hall of the University of Nanterre by 142 students unleashed a cycle of provocation and repression that led to the convocation of eight “leaders” before the counsel of the University of Paris, slated for May 6. When a fire broke out on May 2, 1968, on the premises of the Sorbonne student union, there was no doubt that it was due to a handful of students on the extreme Right (the “Occident” movement) getting at the Sorbonne students, with whom they had constant skirmishes. The Sorbonne students and a small group already famous at Nanterre
(the “movement of March 22”) called for a manifestation in the courtyard of the Sorbonne on May 3 in response to this aggression.

We were hardly numerous that afternoon when everything began: maybe nine hundred at the most. Suddenly the rumor spread that commandos of the “Occident” were threatening to return. In the courtyard of the Sorbonne, some pieces of wood cropped up, a few people broke a chair or two with an eye to meeting up with the assailants: no big deal. But rumor of the presence of the Nanterre “fanatics” had spread. The rector and his secretary general became anxious. They asked the police to intervene—an extremely rare act. The students were promised that they could go free if they left the property. But in several dozen minutes the Sorbonne was sealed off. We were prisoners in the courtyard. A police brigade advanced and we negotiated, a bit stunned by what had happened. The police had never in students’ memory (since the war!) entered into the Sorbonne to suppress a manifestation. The commissar who accompanied the policemen and the representatives of the rector was calm: he proposed letting the girls go and guaranteed that there would be no violence if we got into the police vehicles for an “identity check.” We accepted and were made to enter the buses arranged in front of the Sorbonne. When my turn came, quite quickly, I heard the driver say to the policeman charged with watching over us in the rear compartment of the bus that the situation was tense and he should be careful: the Quarter was in a state of joyful insurrection. Alerted by the girls who had been released and the noria of police buses, students throughout the Latin Quarter had spontaneously mobilized to the cry of “Liberate our comrades.” During the ride that led us to the commissariat from the Place de l’Opéra we heard cries and through the bars we saw hundreds of protesters attacked, sometimes violently, by the overwhelmed policemen. One of my comrades suggested that I neutralize the policeman accompanying us in the rear of the bus, open the doors, and release the twenty or so students around us. Somewhat surprised, I replied that we would see what happened; in fact we were received civilly at the commissariat and released around ten o’clock at night, with the exception of Daniel Cohn Bendit who, accompanied by Xavier Langlade, a famous militant at Nanterre, had to wait several hours longer. We talked late into the night and began to plan the action of the following days. We had the feeling that something was beginning, a spirit of insurrection that we had never encountered before. The symbolic intervention of the police into the Sorbonne had occurred on a Friday (May 3); the appearance of the accused Nanterre students before the disciplinary counsel was scheduled for Monday May 6. The two weekend days were the occasion for feverish preparations. Without being entirely conscious of what was in the works, all the student groups were busy mobilizing their comrades and composing tracts. The day of May 6 witnessed an intense agitation: Nanterre and the Sorbonne were closed, students were protesting in the Latin Quarter. Another protest was organized at Denfert-Rochereau on May 7: this time it brought together tens of thousands of people.
As soon as the action was launched, the revolt was no longer confined to the Latin Quarter: it reached the lycées and part of the populace. In the west of France, workers and peasants began to participate in the protests. The night of May 10 to 11, barricades were raised and then violently destroyed by the forces of order. It was as if the city had renewed its tradition of “revolutionary days” but with a notable difference: the students and the portion of the populace who supported them were protesting peacefully; the language was revolutionary, but the acts were in the tradition of classic student and popular manifestations. The night of May 10 to 11, the student service order tried with all its force to minimize the confrontation and to contain the physical violence. Despite the ineptness of power and the ministers’ total incomprehension of the movement—and without underestimating the police violence—the sang-froid of the prefect of police and the interposition of intellectuals and some union representatives contributed to avoiding confrontations that could have been bloody. During the days of May, we never saw anything comparable to the awful repression of the Algerians on October 17, 1961, or even Charonne in 1962. On his return from Afghanistan on May 11, the Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou, decided to yield to the demands, to release the imprisoned students and to reopen the universities, including the Sorbonne, which was immediately occupied. The most intense moment began May 16 and lasted until May 30, the date of the grand Gaullist and anticomunist manifestation that marked the resumption of power. It was the moment of the encounter between the students’ revolutionary ideal and the reality of a country that relived in its depths the great working-class dreams of the popular front. While the students thought they were living episodes of the soviet of Petrograd, the unions rediscovered the paradigm of the “Matignon accords,” which permitted a union-management agreement on May 27 in rue de Grenelle.

Begun by a modest student manifestation on May 3, the revolt was transformed into a giant social protest movement without the agents in the conflict—students, unions, parties, government—fully realizing what was happening. Since 1789, Paris has been a city where revolutionary days follow each other, each one calling forth the next, from July 14 to the Commune of Paris, passing by the fall of Charles X and of Louis-Philippe. Trained in this type of historical tradition, social actors always look backwards to find in past crises a model for present crises. Students, often impregnated with a summary Marxism, thought they were the actors in a new October Revolution; unionists and men of the Left, dazed by the extent of the strikes, imagined that they were seeing a new popular front that would rid them of a fifth republic and a man whom they identified with “personal power.” The government and management lived in the confused fear of a plot bringing leftists, communists, and socialists together in one deadly front. This is why the history of the events of May is as much a historiographic adventure in which each camp, even each group poses in the position that seems most advantageous in the
eyes of history, where everyone looks toward a past event to give his current attitude a certain style, incarnated as much in clothes as in postures. The rhetoric of discourse, the forms of action, the slogans draw from the historical repertory and from the traditions accompanying it. I don’t believe therefore that 1968 was one of the manifestations of the “age of crowds” in Serge Moscovici’s sense. The student revolt was the fruit of a protest against archaism, authoritarianism, and the antiquated methods of a university caught up in the cult of elites and strangled by the poverty of its means. The workers’ demand came from another gap that pointed to the contradiction between the modernization of institutions and the economy, proclaimed since 1958, and the workers’ miserable condition. Preoccupied by the place of France in the world, de Gaulle had neglected the social and economic difficulties of a working class still powerfully influenced by the Communist Party, a class which had not forgotten the promises of a better world after Liberation. May 1968 was born of the encounter of these repressions, and it made possible, beyond the political failure, a transformation of mores and an opening of the social space. May 1968, in its exaggerations as in its successes, is one of the historical events where crowds are never unanimous, where from behind the collective and revolutionary phraseology peers out situationist humor: “be realistic: demand the impossible.”

Translated from the French by Matthew TIEWS