

The Milgram Experiment*

“... the crucial adaptation man has to make is to the social structure, and his collaboration in building it.”

--Heinz Hartman

1. The Subject
‘please continue’

I throw the next switch.

The man in white said to.

The levers are in a line.

The screams are in another room.

I understand rows
walls
continua
degrees of separation

that always something must come next:

say it, do it
now
now.

2. The Doctor
‘the experiment requires that you continue’

Look,
the mentor told me
Keep looking

(‘no response’)

So I sat at the fishbowl
night after night
For weeks I saw a fish
with an orange gaping mouth
suspended in stupidity

is a wrong response. '

So I prod, jab, shock, kick.

Then one night
though some would deny it

I saw the truth:

We are nothing if not response
and response lacking, I punish nothing.)

my own eye
in the fish's eye
made weird by the convex bowl

3. The Student

'it is absolutely essential that you continue'

Teacher's pawns on both sides
face the neutral wall

(Madness spawns in a hothouse.
My desire to get it right grows.)

Control
pours
from flask to flask
Collaboration bloodies the walls

I play dumb, fake my agony

(He screams:
he is she
she is I
I am he
And I loathe us all.

You throw switches, despising
wrong answers more than pain

I throw the switch
on myself,

imagining how I squirm.

Do we each love truth that much?

I brace for the last impersonation

Some answers are plain wrong.)

Under a swarm of harmless wires
I, confederate, expire
for the ninth time today

4. The Results

The student takes the blows,
tells a knotty, delirious story.

The professor types his report,
coddles the technician in himself.

The subject, de-hoaxed, distraught,
makes his will, signs the final release.

(We are nothing
if not response...)

So ends the study of rank

Truth twists on the pitch of a scripted scream
Mobius
Escher
mockingbird in the lab

eye within eye
without end

5. The Poet 'you must go on'

I throw the switch on my selves,
write my various reports.

Teacher, subject, student
--doctor, collaborator, confederate--
experiment's trinity
internalized:

testing, testing . . .

knowledge by deceit and fracture,
teasing out salty, bitter ends.

Taunted by voices, prodded by strange hands,
I spin blindfolded
until I stumble forward,
taking my turn,

cold steel between my fingertips,
worms of utter darkness swimming in my sight:

eyes upon
eyes upon
eyes
in the dense glass bowl.

*Note: In the 1960s the social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a series of ethically controversial experiments to study obedience to authority. He wanted to test Hannah Arendt's thesis about the "banality of evil" and to explain the participation of ordinary people in carrying out collective acts of brutality such as the Holocaust. In the original experiment, an "experimenter," appearing as a doctor or professor, recruited 40 male "subjects" to participate in what they believed was a learning test. The subjects were asked to administer electrical shocks of increasing severity to a "learner" (Milgram's student and confederate) as punishment for failed memory. Of the 40 subjects, 26 obeyed the experimenter fully and administered the highest level of shock, a voltage they assumed was severe and dangerous; 14 broke off the experiment at different times in the late stages of punishment. Many of the participants, both subjects and scientists, suffered extreme emotional distress during and after the experiment.

Quotations in the poem are from Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).