

## THE PREDICAMENT OF EXPERIENCE\*

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Every discipline has its foundational terms, those words that practitioners use to name what they study, or how they study, or why that study is valid. These terms often go unscrutinized when a discipline is up and running, but in the formative stages of a discipline and in periods of contention or crisis they often become subject to intensive criticism and attempts at redefinition. Challenging foundational terms is no simple task. Because they are foundational, they are difficult to do without, even by those who would reject them. They are often used or assumed by those who question them, and after intensive questioning is done they often simply recur, even in their most unquestioned, naive form. The “foundational” nature of foundational terms, one begins to see, is not just a matter of a basic organizing concept or a description of some natural process, but of a term that is invested with aspirations of different sorts. The term also offers authorization to interpret, enacts a wish, suggests a cultural utopia, or puts in place a political program. The density of functions found in foundational terms guarantees that even the most questioned term will return.

As the books under consideration below demonstrate, “experience” is one of the most common of basic foundational terms, serving at different times as object, method, and justification for epistemology, religious interpretation, aesthetics, anthropology, political theory, and historical writing.<sup>1</sup> Of primary foundational terms, experience is one of the most common, and it is one of the most vexed. Every attempt to establish it as a foundation of a disciplinary understanding has been met by strenuous critique, reformulation, and even an occasional desire to expel the term from a discipline. Joan Scott’s well-known criticism of historians’ use of the term “experience” thus leads her to imagine

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<sup>1</sup> Other such terms might include “reason,” “nature,” “self,” and “God”—although the last has clearly lost most of its foundational status in the last two hundred years.

for a moment how “tempting” it is “to abandon [the term] altogether.” But the temptation of a clarifying purge gives way to the return of the term, so that Scott, for example, immediately signals seeming surrender: “But *experience* is so much part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion.” “*Experience*,” she concludes, “is not a word we can do without.”<sup>2</sup> Other critics have come to the same conclusion. As Clifford Geertz reported on a conference on the use of experience in anthropology, no participant there was entirely happy with this “elusive master concept,” but all felt unable to do without it.<sup>3</sup> How should one, within a discipline, relate to a term that is at once inadequate and indispensable, that should be both used and repudiated?

Scott’s essay clearly recognizes this predicament and she seeks to negotiate the problem by bringing to bear tools of the “linguistic turn”—Foucauldian analysis, deconstruction, and gender critique—all of which point out how a putative experiencing subject is an artificial and contradictory creation of discourse and politics. Scott’s answer to the predicament of experience is, in effect, to put question marks around the word whenever it is used, or, in the nomenclature of deconstruction, to use the term but use it “under erasure.”

Scott’s problematization of experience marked a reaction to what she saw as a peculiar development in historiography. Historians who had used sophisticated critical techniques to reject the behaviorist empiricism of a positivist social science then seemed to short-circuit their critical judgment to adopt unquestioningly, as their object of study, the “irreducibility of experience” (the term is John Toews’s, whom Scott criticizes)—the subjective, self-described experience of historical actors.

These recent books mark out another cycle in the history of “experience” that extends from Scott’s article and its use of the linguistic turn to question the viability of the concept. More than a decade after Scott’s article, these books in varying degrees show a turning away from that kind of critique and a desire, once again, to recuperate experience. They pursue this aim in different ways. Martin Jay’s *Songs of Experience: European and American Variations on a Universal Theme* traces the history of concepts of experience from antiquity but especially as they proliferate in the modern period. Craig Ireland’s *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience: Self-Identity, Late Modernity, and the Politics of Immediacy* offers a macrohistory not just of some concepts of experience but of experience itself in the modern period. Frank Ankersmit’s provocative *Sublime Experience of History*, which, he announces, “can be seen as an uncompromising attack on all that came

<sup>2</sup> Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Theory* 17 (summer 1991), 797.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 256, note 117. Jay is hereafter cited in the text in parentheses.

to be known over the last twenty to thirty years by the name of ‘theory,’” argues for a new Romanticism of direct historical experience.<sup>4</sup> All these books seek to recover an idea of experience as a pretheorized, prediscursive, direct encounter with others, with society, or with the past, and through that as a source of authentic knowledge about oneself. What makes this project, this new cycle of experiencing, so admirable, awkward, and bizarre (my respective impressions of these books) is that it is attempted with an acute awareness of the many problems surrounding the term “experience.” These books show a common desire to rehabilitate experience. The question is, what kind of experience will do, given its long, troubled history?

### A TAXONOMY OF EXPERIENCE

Martin Jay’s *Songs of Experience* is the third in a series of large books that trace the long developments of a key foundational concept in European intellectual history. The previous books—one on the concept of totality and the other on visibility—start in antiquity and then follow how the concept is used by thinkers in a particular tradition. Jay shows how the idea of totality plays out in Western Marxism and how visibility is denigrated in twentieth-century French philosophy and social theory.<sup>5</sup> *Songs of Experience* seems to track in the same way, starting in antiquity and ending in the present, and it deals again with some of the important theorists Jay has been concerned with his entire career. But this work also departs from his earlier books. *Songs of Experience* begins with a general account of the history of empirical epistemology from antiquity to Kant, and then, once in the modern era, instead of charting one intellectual tradition or genre of intellectual concerns, examines how the term “experience” has functioned for key theorists in quite different areas of modern religious thought and aesthetics and in political and historical theory (including a consideration of the debate around Scott’s article). This river-to-tributaries flow of exposition follows the way in which experience, once treated from the point of view of an integral, multidimensional self unified by religious belief with society and universe, comes to be disaggregated into a subject that experiences in disconnected modes, some of which Jay considers.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Ireland, *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience: Self-Identity, Late Modernity, and the Politics of Immediacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10. These books are hereafter cited in the text in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984) and *idem*, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993).

The book is spectacular in its combination of range and cogency. Even when Jay deals with quite familiar material, such as the history of empirical epistemology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the exegesis surprises in its refinement and criticism of standard conceptions. Jay is indefatigable in pursuing the twists and turns of modern ideas of experience, carefully analyzing different theorists over two centuries. In the last, considerable, section of the book, Jay then examines how the sense of fractured experience found expression in a general *fin de siècle* and twentieth-century theme of the “destruction of experience,” and how different schools of thought—American pragmatism, German critical theory, and French poststructuralism—addressed that theme.

The breadth and fairness of Jay’s considerations are evident in the nature of the scholarship. Usually, academics operate within certain interpretative communities, smaller than a field, and their citations, while serving the function of indicating sources, also signify membership in a particular community. Footnotes are a way of showing the flag. Jay’s notes are very unusual in how they combine the highly specialized reference (for example to an article on Hume and the French spiritualist Maine de Birne in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*) with scholarly but also academically more fashionable writing (an article on “Sex and Talk” in *Critical Theory*; 74, note 120). This man has read everything, but it all appears in a pertinent, scholarly manner, without pedantry or flaunting fashionableness. Jay welcomes all good work into his book.

The breadth and openness of Jay’s book might draw criticism in different ways. Critics have taken issue with the selectivity of the study and I could do the same (Karl Marx, for whom a notion of experience was crucial in his turn away from Hegelian philosophy in the 1840s, seems a notable absence, considering that his twentieth-century followers are discussed), but the book, as we shall see, is guided by a cogent and systematic set of concerns. Jay might also be criticized for not “contextualizing” in the manner now expected in certain contextualist programs, such as those of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock. Jay is aware of the imperative to contextualize, and does just that for different theorists and ideas to different degrees, but he is also skeptical of historians’ contextualizations, of how they might in fact function more to identify an idea’s occasion than to explain its meaning, or of how contextualizations sometimes do not do justice to the fullness of a theory. There is, for example, a gentle but still distinct “whatever” quality to his review of recent historical contextualizations of American pragmatism (including those of Jackson Lears and James Kloppenberg), none of which he thinks does “justice to the complexity” of the “period and the emergence of pragmatism” (276–77).

The self-conscious openness of the study, derived from a healthy skepticism of narrowings of the subject, whether conceptual or contextualist, produces a book that is less certain of where it is heading. As Jay puts it in the Introduction (in

a sentence written in 1997): “The experience of writing may lead me where I do not expect to go. You, the reader, will soon know how it will end; I, the author, am at the moment of writing these words, still eager to find out” (8). Jay knows that readers will find this statement puzzling and he defends it in a footnote. The book’s lack of destination shows up in the absence of a necessary conclusion; chapters on other modes of experience (such as science) could be simply added on. But this openness or lack of closure in the book does not mean that it has no “conclusion”; Jay, in fact, distinctly endorses a particular type of experience. The flexibility that Jay announces in the Introduction and the openness of the book’s structure are all of a piece with what emerges near the end of the book as Jay’s answer to the predicament of experience.

Experience considered as a source of knowledge had been treated suspiciously from antiquity through the scholastic Middle Ages to the early modern period. From the “dawning of what we now like to call the modern age” (19), as Jay carefully puts it, experience was established in different ways as a legitimate basis of knowledge and each of these ways set off chain reactions of criticism and redefinition. To make sense of the multitudinous notions of experience, to recognize continuities and divergences over a long history and in numerous areas of concern, I have made greatly expanded use of a distinction in German between two types of experience, mediated and immediate, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. Noted explicitly by Jay in the beginning of his book and more implicitly by Ireland and Ankersmit, these large categories and distinctions within them allow us to see how these writers seek in modulations of experience solutions to the predicament of experience, solutions that in different ways and to different extents prove unsuccessful.

In German, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* refer to what in English is called by the sole term “experience.” *Erfahrung* associates experience with a journey (from the German verb *fahren*), a learning process in which one gradually accumulates knowledge from encounters with others and with the natural world. According to the theorists in Jay’s book, the mediated developing experience of *Erfahrung* assumes different forms depending on the nature of the experiencing subject and its relationship with the external world. Jay presents us with two contrasting types in the early modern period, each finding followers and critics from then to the current day. Ireland points to a third type of mediated experience at another dawning of the modern age, as he refers to the late eighteenth century.

Jay’s first model of mediated experience is found in the essays of Michel de Montaigne published from 1577 to 1588. Writing in his late fifties and believing—mistakenly—that he was nearing the end of his life, Montaigne reflected on his life’s experiences, and in a concluding essay, “On Experience,” examined the nature of his experiencing in general. He describes different social, intellectual, and physical experiences, including not only what he sees going on

publicly in politics and religion but also what he likes to read (mainly Latin literature), conversations he recalls, his relations with his friends, his physical ailments. Reflecting on his experiences makes him distrust excesses of all sorts (religious, political, philosophical, and physical), tolerant of others (as in a famous sympathetic article on cannibalism), and exceedingly modest about the contingency, variability, and idiosyncrasy of his experiencing self. The pursuit of his essays' intention—to understand himself through his experiences—yields this remarkable conclusion:

The world is but a perpetual see-saw. Everything goes incessantly up and down . . . I cannot fix my subject. He is always restless, and reels with a natural intoxication. I catch him here, as he is at the moment when I turn my attention to him. I do not portray his being; I portray his passage; not a passage from one age to another . . . but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must suit my story to the hour, for soon I may change, not only by chance but also by intention. It is a record of various and variable occurrences, an account of thoughts that are unsettled and . . . at times contradictory, either because I am then another self, or because I approach my subject under different conditions . . . [My mind] is always in its apprenticeship and on trial.<sup>6</sup>

Montaigne's experiencing is fully embodied, performed with the recognition of the intellectualism and the physicality of the experiencing self, as well as a strong sense of how experiencing is affected by specific circumstances. This kind of experiential awareness leads him to recognize that life, in Jay's words, is "full of paradoxes, ironies, and disappointments," a view that does not dismay him but confers, as the above quotation illustrates well, "a capacity to live with uncertainty and doubt" (26). Montaigne's experiencing self constitutes for Jay an ideal mediation, a benevolent relationship of self to self and self to world.

Contrary to this humane, modest, and skeptical experience anchored in an indivisible unity of intellectual, psychological, and bodily conditions, Montaigne's younger contemporary Francis Bacon believed that methodically analyzed experience could be used to master the natural world. Bacon enshrined as the principle of useful and reliable knowledge "the ideal of generalization from replicable experience," which explained what had been observed according to the workings of natural laws. Adopted by the scientific revolution as "the 'scientific method' *tout court*," the Baconian scientific view reduced the complex multiple nature of experience seen in Montaigne's essays to utilitarian cognition, disembodied or abstracted from any real subject. Experience here was perceived from the point of view of a transcendental metasubject—the detached, impartial scientific mind. On the logic of this scientific reduction of experience, Jay writes, "qualitative distinctions of experience were subsumed

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<sup>6</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London, 1958), 235.

under quantitative commensurability,” ultimately to the point where the varied, embodied experiences of human beings would ideally be replaced by disinterested and accurate “objective” instruments (33–6). The “testimony of nonhumans,” as Bruno Latour provocatively put it, would come to serve as the most accurate reflection of the meaning of human experience (quoted in Jay, 36).

The debates in sensationalist epistemology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries issued in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant that in crucial ways adopted for modern philosophy the more narrowly defined experience of Baconian science. Kant too construed the experiencing subject as a rational and transcendental metasubject (in the unity of apperception), which made experience principally concerned, even in its aesthetic and moral dimensions, with rational recognition (i.e. as reason recognizing itself) and led to complaints that this distorted the fullness of experience in religion, aesthetics, and morality.

At roughly the same time that Kant was writing, another model of mediated experience was being formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt and others, one that proved very influential in Germany. *Bildung*, or the cultivation of the self through experience, resembles Montaigne’s views in that it sees experience as a manifold in which the experiencing self develops emotions, aesthetic taste, and moral judgment in addition to reason. Ireland alone explicitly identifies and discusses this type of experience, and he emphasizes its open and experimental nature, but overlooks its distinctive quality, what makes it unlike Montaigne’s and more like classical, Aristotelian justifications of experience. In *Bildung* experience is teleological, idealist, and idealistic in that it conceives of experience—sensory and mental—not as leading to an acceptance of uncertainty and contradiction but as a journey through those to a point where they are overcome in some mature understanding, whether of a Wilhelm Meister or a Hegelian *Geist*. As Wilhelm von Humboldt put it in *The Limits of State Action*, “The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole.”<sup>7</sup>

The slow, steady, mediated accumulation in experience of either scientific knowledge or of wisdom, whether ironic or idealist, this *Erfahrung* in its various forms, is contrasted in German to another kind of experience, to the immediacy of *Erlebnis*. In Jay’s book *Erlebnis* mainly appears as the great enemy of mediated experience in its transcendentalist, scientific, and Kantian form; in Ireland’s, *Erlebnis* displaces the mediated experience of *Bildung* in contemporary culture; in Ankersmit’s, it takes shape as the Romantic antidote to the transcendentalist

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<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, trans. Joseph Coulthard and J. W. Burrow (Indianapolis, 1993), 10.

desiccations of modern historical writing. (I mainly treat the last two in subsequent sections of this essay.)

Where *Erfahrung* is concerned with experience as a gradual mediation of the self in its encounter with others and nature, *Erlebnis* refers to a direct, unmediated experience, indicating participation in some primary unity, “normally,” as Jay points out, located in an “everyday world” or “*Lebenswelt*” “of commonplace, untheorized practices,” but also often seen as manifested in “an intense and vital rupture of everyday life” (11). The mediated nature of *Erfahrung* shows itself as a process of reflective experimentation, of trial and error, from which knowledge of varying certainty (depending on the type of mediated experience) is accumulated. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, is prereflective and immediate; it carries the force of self-evident certainty, so that it sometimes appears revelatory, an experience that can suddenly and fundamentally alter one’s views and change one’s life.

Jay points out how notions of immediate experience appeared over and against transcendentalist, scientific versions of mediated experience, especially as that view of experience spread to other areas of concern. An idea of a prereflective immediate experience of God lay at the basis, Jay shows, of the reaction of modern religious thought against the rationalized religion that followed from the Enlightenment, a reaction diversely exemplified by Friedrich Schleiermacher’s elevation of a personal intuitive experience of faith; William James’s emphasis on the subjective, inner experience of religion; and the early thought of Martin Buber that sought an “ecstatic unity between subject and object based on affect, not cognition” (125). An idea of a direct experience of unity inspired aesthetic theorists (Friedrich Schiller, Walter Benjamin, and William Dewey are Jay’s examples) to see in art a method of reunifying a fragmented human being and society. In politics, a notion of primary immediate holistic experience informed the views of diverse groups—most conventionally, as Jay mentions, the irrationalism of *fin de siècle* and early twentieth-century critics of modern society, such as Georges Sorel and Ernst Jünger, who turned direct experience into brutal and violent direct action. But the belief in a primary authentic, unified experience also figures into a very different politics—in the ideas of Michael Oakeshott, in E. P. Thompson’s rethinking of Marxism and social history, and in the identity politics questioned by Joan Scott in her article on experience and by Ireland in his critique of subaltern appeals to immediacy. *Erlebnis* was what Wilhelm Dilthey wanted historians to pursue as they would re-experience the original experience of historical actors. An even more radical idea of immediate experience, as we shall see, informs Ankersmit’s recent injunctions for historical writing.

Numerous problems and debates, as Jay cogently points out, followed from the installment of immediate experience over a more pedestrian *Erfahrung*. The emphasis on an individual’s immediate subjective experiences in religion seemed to elevate the experiencing individual over what was presumably being



experienced, replacing the external otherness of God with personal feelings. In the history of art, the same focus on subjective experience, as Jay and others have pointed out, set in motion a logic that undercut the idea of objectivity in art, making art a function of personal taste, psychological states, and institutional framing. A politics of immediate experience in the early twentieth century fed a right-wing politics of the will; in the late twentieth century, Jay notes, a politics based on the putative certainty of direct experience yielded on the left a self-righteous subjectivism that claimed itself immune to external criticism (i.e. a person lacking a defining experience was ruled out as a valid interlocutor) and a personalized politics, so that “acting entirely in the private sphere—say, to reorganize child rearing responsibilities—was as political an act as running for office, defending a public policy, or even overthrowing a regime” (177).

Reacting against scientific and Kantian *Erfahrung*, intellectuals of the last two centuries elevated the immediacy of direct experience, a development that meant replacing epistemology with psychology—and often just personal psychology. But in another sense, as Jay argues, both forms of experience—transcendentalist, scientific, Kantian experience, and the immediacy of *Erlebnis*—share a common orientation. Experience, according to Jay, consists of two components, a self or subject who experiences and the object that that self experiences. Experiencing means experiencing something outside oneself and involves, Jay says, a passive submission to the object and recognition of the object’s separateness from the subject. Both mediated transcendentalist, scientific experience (especially in its Kantian form) and its antithesis, immediate intuitive *Erlebnis*, emphasize the experiencing subject over what it is that is being experienced. And, in reaction to both, writers and theorists came to emphasize the independent role in experience of the object of experience.

Criticizing the subjectivist psychologism of Schleiermacher and Martin Buber, religious philosophers such as Karl Barth and Rudolf Otto, according to Jay, sought to reinstate the distinctive otherness of a mysterious God as the object of religious experience. In art, the rehabilitation of art led to different notions of the autonomy of art, that art should be best appreciated not as the expression of an artistic persona, but, in terms sometimes reminiscent of classical aesthetics, according to qualities that inhered in the object itself. Painting, in this view, might take as its theme the materiality of paint itself, and literature might actually be focused on its own metaphorical nature. We might add that the poststructuralist slogan of Derrida—*il n’y a pas de hors texte*—announces an ultimate objective textuality irrespective of authorial intention or historical context. In some poststructuralist thought of the twentieth century, the theme of removing the subject from experience, of thinking of “experience without a subject,” made a rejection of the conceits of humanism into an ideal, as seen for example in Michel’s Foucault’s wish-like conclusion in *The Order of Things*

that one day “man would be erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”

Jay examines a related theme of the poststructuralist attack on the subject side of experience, namely its recurring concern with “limit experiences,” extremes of experience that transgress personal subjectivity. A radical decentering of subjectivity, as Jay points out, is the central theme in Georges Bataille’s studies of sacrifice, formlessness, and abjection. Roland Barthes’s examinations of desire and death have the same focus. Michel Foucault’s studies of madness, illness, pain, and death seek to define encounters of the kind that, as Foucault puts it, “tear . . . the subject from itself” (quoted in Jay, 398). Jay is rather skeptical of some claims and some versions of limit experience as an answer to the problems of subject-based experience. Shattering the self in experience, Bataille discovered, is a lot less exalted when he sees notions of sacrifice and violence figuring into Nazi ideology. And we might note that Foucault’s notion of living the limit experience has raised all sorts of questions about how one might coherently or viably accomplish that. James Miller’s *The Passions of Michel Foucault* (1993), despite sympathetic attempts to understand Foucault’s life as a study of limit experiences, ended up suggesting, to great controversy, that Foucault was ultimately acting out a death wish.

With admirable care and precision, Jay separates out the various kinds of mediated and immediate experience (even if he generally leaves out the mediated experience of *Bildung*) and analyzes what is at stake in each conceptually. The great strength of Jay’s approach lies in sorting and sizing up the theories intellectuals formulated about experience, but it might prove misleading on how intellectuals represented their own experiencing. The approach works better as a taxonomy of theory than in discussing specific cases. In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill presents an experiencing self that is explicitly based on the model of humanist *Bildung* (he in fact quotes the famous passage from Humboldt cited above as his ideal of individualism) but justifies the autonomy of that self in transcendentalist utilitarian terms (i.e. this is the best self for the human race’s accumulation of knowledge). To get to this particular amalgamation of putatively conflicting forms of mediated experience, Mill in his *Autobiography* (1873) has recourse to *Erlebnis*—to the sudden revelation, he tells us, while reading Wordsworth, that the strictly rationalist utilitarian ethos of his Benthamite father lacked meaningful emotion, which Mill now saw he had to embrace to become a whole person. Mill’s incorporation of that kind of experiencing yielded not the denial of Benthamite utilitarianism but its fusion with *Bildung*. The modes of experience in Mill’s representation of his experiencing do not operate in the clear-cut and mutually exclusive manner that Jay’s theorists suggest.

In James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) there is the same blurring of experiences. The evolution of the protagonist, Stephen

Dedalus, is shaped from boyhood by a series of embodied, cumulative progressive experiences that lead him in university to recognize, from hearing his name called and from seeing then an image of beauty (the famous crane-girl scene), that he has a special destiny—to become an artist. Constituted by both mediated and direct experience, the artistic self, now self-confident in his superior calling to the point of arrogance, prepares to set out on his life's purpose. But this accomplished aesthetic self identifies that purpose not as the expression or glorification of that self, or as benefiting the good of society, but in terms of creating an experience without a self. In genuine art, Dedalus announces, "the personality of the artist refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself." The novel enlists all the types of experience to constitute a story of the origin of the autonomous art object, as language and image that perseveres on its own. In Joyce's novel there is also no easy separating out of experiences, as theorists suggest, but something of a muddle and without any sign of dissonance that Jay's theorists would expect in a fusion of mutually exclusive experiences.

In these and other cases there are considerable discrepancies between the differentiated abstract logics of experience produced by intellectuals and the way their own experiences are in fact represented and interact. This is not of course a criticism of Jay's analysis, which is for the most part concerned with unpacking the theories and not the theorists, but it does leave us wondering about their theories, about whether logics of experience err on the side of excessive abstraction from how people represent their experience or in fact do experience. The same problem arises in the books by Ankersmit and Ireland, but with more severe consequences because those works are concerned not just with the theories of experience but with actual experience.

#### ERLEBNIS REDUX

Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* is a collection of essays that takes issue with Richard Rorty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and other philosophers, as well as with modern historical writing, and offers a pastiche of his own interpretations of philosophical issues, history, literature, and art in order to clear away all the intellectual apparatus that has gotten in the way of genuine historical experience. Ankersmit writes in the style of analytic philosophy, but against analytic philosophy as well as historical writing (at one point, 175, because he thinks it "helpful," as he puts it, he writes in mathematical formulae). He is a contemporary opponent of the scientific notion of experience applied to philosophy and history, which he sees as a cognitivist takeover of reality that in historical writing has issued "in an almost endless series of transcendentalist monstrosities." And by those, he means the usual *bêtes noires* of conventional history ("semiotics, hermeneutics, structuralism and

post-structuralism, tropology, deconstructivism, textualism),” but Ankersmit then also expresses his dissatisfaction with more traditional histories—social historians, econometricians, the *Annales* school—in fact, all followers of “contextualism” (105–6, 126, 128, 257, 262), all historical writing ultimately that can be traced back to the original spoiler of genuine historical experience, Leopold von Ranke. The profession, in a word, is the problem.<sup>8</sup>

Contextualization, in Ankersmit’s account, is the distorting method of a disembodied transcendentalism, a means of gathering systematic knowledge from the point of view of a detached, impartial metasubject—the professional historian, who forces historical experience into analytic grids, historiographical traditions, and hermeneutical perspectives. In its initial conception, Pierre Nora’s *Les Lieux des mémoires*, to cite one example, summons up, for Ankersmit, a whole new area of historical experience, but Nora then betrays that revelation, reverting, Ankersmit says, “to the strongly scientific traditions” of Nora’s *Annales* school education. Ankersmit concludes,

immediately after having identified the territory of historical experience, Nora transformed it into a new domain of (traditional) historical research. That is to say, he immediately left this trajectory [of recognizing direct historical experience] again for the safe and so reassuring position of the historical (or, rather, ahistorical) transcendental self investigating how previous generations of Frenchmen experienced the past. (262)

What Ankersmit believes should be rediscovered is evident in a small number of dissident (and, as it turns out, usually politically and culturally conservative) historians—Alexis de Tocqueville, Jacob Burckhardt, and, above all, Johan Huizinga. These historians, he tells us, came to write insightful and passionate histories in reaction to the state of professional knowledge of the time, opening themselves to a direct experience of the past: “When responding to the ‘past’s call,’ the historian momentarily ‘forgets’ the historiographical context within which he normally operates. For a moment there is only the past itself, revealing to him its quasi-noumenal nakedness with an unusual directness and immediacy” (125).

In his repudiation of a putatively transcendentalist notion of experience in professional historical writing, in his alternative appeal to a revelatory lived experience, Ankersmit rehearses the early nineteenth-century rejection of a reductionist scientific *Erfahrung* for a transfiguring immediate *Erlebnis*, an identification he embraces when he repeatedly tells us how his approach is

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<sup>8</sup> Ankersmit likes certain contemporary historical works, of a crossover (from academia to greater popularity) type: Simon Schama on landscape in art, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, Ferdinand Braudel on the Mediterranean. He does not refer to more recent historical studies nor does he explain why some of these very professional histories should escape his charge against such historical writing.

Romantic and how the experience he seeks is “sublime.” But Ankersmit’s notion of recovering direct experience is more radical than what is imagined by earlier exponents of historical *Erlebnis*, such as Dilthey and R. G. Collingwood. Contrary to the usual approach to historical *Erlebnis*, which sees the historian’s task as re-experiencing what historical actors experienced, Ankersmit argues for an even more fundamental experience of historical immediacy, an experience not of others’ experience (which can only be intellectually reconstructed) but of a sudden, overwhelming experience of the past itself. “[P]receding or transcending questions of truth and falsity,” this experience strips off the distorting layers of professional and theoretical contextualization to reach a direct contact with the past, which feels absolutely authentic (178–9). Huizinga, Ankersmit’s hero of sublime historical experience, describes the procedure in this way. In keeping with the formula of immediate experience, the experience begins with a quotidian encounter that spontaneously opens up to more intense feelings:

a historical detail in an engraving, or in a notarial act for that matter, while it may be indifferent to me, may suddenly give me a conviction of an immediate contact with the past, . . . an (don’t laugh) almost ecstatic experience of no longer being myself, . . . of getting in touch with the essence of things . . . It is a pathos, an ebriety of the moment . . . This is the nature of what I call historical sensation. (quoted on 126)

Something triggers an intensified sensation, causing the past to surge forth, blotting out the historian’s professional persona, which would otherwise think in the channels of its historiographical preconceptions. This new sensation allows him or her to perceive the past decontextualized, more vividly for what it actually is, not *eigentlich* in the Rankean sense of a re-created past from documents—Ranke, Ankersmit claims in a sneer, never had a sublime historical experience—but in a Romantic sense of ecstasis. Though writing mainly in the style of an analytic philosopher, Ankersmit wants to rehabilitate Romantic mood and feeling and its notion of how those both reflect and provide access to a genuine original unity of experience, the *ur*-historical in this case. His answer to the predicament of experience is to reassert against the many putative problems of contemporary philosophy and historical writing the return to the most *erlebt* of *Erlebnisse*, to the past directly experienced as a spontaneous revelation.

But is there really such a thing as an immediate, decontextualized experience of the past? Or, put somewhat differently, can such a thing ever be shown or explained in a way that is true to what Ankersmit says are its qualities; can one speak of anything without contextualization, which according to Ankersmit ruins direct experience?

Consider Ankersmit’s own presentation of Huizinga’s description of historical sensation that I have quoted. To make Huizinga’s claims comprehensible, Ankersmit tells us first that Huizinga was very strongly influenced by the so-called

theory of “sensitivism” of the Dutch novelist and literary critic Lodewijk van Deijssel, who like postimpressionists, symbolists, and, we might add, Bergsonians of the period, was engaged in debates about sense perception and its artistic and literary representation. Van Deijssel, according to Ankersmit, “radicalized realism” (as did the others) by focusing on the most direct and immediate sensory perception of reality. Huizinga takes over Van Deijssel’s description of how that perception operates in Huizinga’s description of historical sensation quoted above. In other words, what Ankersmit himself shows is that Huizinga’s “spontaneous” experience is in fact heavily contextualized and in fact theorized prior to the experience itself and in such a strong manner that one is forced to question whether Huizinga could have had that experience in the way he describes. This conclusion moreover seems obvious given Ankersmit’s exegesis, yet he insists on taking Huizinga’s statement at face value, as if to say “believe this” even as he shows us why we should not.

When Huizinga begins *The Waning of the Middle Ages* with the observation that then “all experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life” (quoted on 136), Ankersmit assumes Huizinga is right about how people experienced then, as Huizinga is right about his own heightened sense of perception. But knowing now the intellectual influences on Huizinga makes us skeptical of whether he is accurately describing the past as it was or projecting on the past a *fin de siècle* sensitivism and a symbolist sentimentality. Knowing that context, being skeptical of the reality of the experience the book seeks to describe, does not devalue Huizinga’s great work, as Ankersmit implies, but makes us appreciate its complexity, its artfulness as well as its limitations (such as its occasional, excruciating symbolist preciousness).

Ankersmit denies contextualization even as he is contextualizing. Refusing to acknowledge his own contextualizing practices, he opts for what he calls, following Huizinga’s lead, a strategy of “reinfantilization”—of the intentional return on the part of an adult of advanced years to experiencing the world as a child, which Ankersmit claims is to see the world afresh. What it actually means is to force oneself to be naive.

What exactly does one perceive in a sublime historical experience? Is there anything more than ambiguous descriptions of feeling stunned or emotionally moved in some way? Ankersmit mentions others whom he thinks have gone through such experiences (e.g. Burckhardt and Goethe), but their responses remain at the level of ambiguous characterization and are again contextualized. Ankersmit’s two examples of his own sublime historical experiences—encounters with Antonio Guardi’s painting *Arcade with Hunters* and with late seventeenth-century Rococo engraving—offer more specific affect, but still fail to operate in the way he has prescribed for such experiences. In both cases he contextualizes the art, and from that contextualization analyzes the art’s formal qualities from which

he draws historical conclusions. There are no sudden revelations spontaneously bestowed upon him. He notices things—a streak of paint—in Guardi's painting that leads to contextualization and reflection. In this way, his procedure does not differ from that of professional cultural and art historians and in fact depends on it in bad faith (i.e. he uses their conventional contextualizing approach while making the general claim that one should do without it). Where he does depart from current professional, academic history is in the historical lessons that his sublime historical experiences offer; far from riveting, discipline-altering recognition, he gives us cliché.

Ankersmit writes that the mood of the Guardi painting—its “ennui”—“gives access to what one might call ‘the mood’ of the *ancien régime*, or at least one of its moods” (273). Ankersmit does not give any explanation for why *this* painting should illustrate the old regime (does he mean all of Europe or only in Venice?) in even one of its supposed “moods” as opposed to, say, the moralism of Jean Baptiste Greuze and the neoclassical revival of David that displaced the Rococo in popularity in the later eighteenth century. He tells us that historians should learn to trust themselves and their immediate responses, which is to say that they should trust their feelings. That is questionable in itself but then to assert that those feelings are the feelings of the “era” itself, feelings which turn out to be overgeneralized cliché, is very amateurish history indeed.

In discussing Rococo design, it is precisely his “feelings”—how he is pleased by that design, how (gratuitously) he dislikes *Jugendstil* design—that are uninteresting mere assertions, to the point of self-indulgence, of personal likes and dislikes. What is interesting is the contextualization of Rococo from cultural and art history that Ankersmit borrows and performs even as he repudiates the value of contextualization. The point derived from formalist and historical contextualization—how in Rococo engraving reality is invaded by ornament—is significant; the sublime wisdom that Ankersmit sees in this point is once again anticlimactic cliché. His revelation: “We may be prepared to see that rococo ornament reflects the Enlightenment’s discovery of the physical world and that it celebrates the victory of modern man over physical reality that was so much part of the Enlightenment’s pride” (311). The questionable linkage of Rococo to the Enlightenment (Rousseau, Diderot, Kant, and in fact *all* the *philosophes* of the last three decades of the eighteenth century would have demurred), the ambiguous macrosubjects of experience (a monolithic “Enlightenment” and “modern man”), the Western Civ soundbite (“the victory of modern man . . . over physical reality”)—all those leave no doubt that Ankersmit’s sublime historical experience is disconcertingly vacuous. Ankersmit’s problem is not in suffering too much professionalized history but in not having read enough.

Like so many other cases of *Erlebnis*, once one has gotten past the melodramatic denunciations of some defective misrepresented *Erfahrung* and

past the ambiguous Romantic invocations of a more passionate, more intense, immediate experience in *Erlebnis* to ask about the actual character and content of that experience, the answer all too often turns out to be empty, unrepresentable, or just trite.<sup>9</sup> Ankersmit's sublime experience, his claim to direct contact with the past, turns out to be hollow abstraction.

## THE DESTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE

Whatever one might say about Ankersmit's distaste for professionalism in philosophy and historical writing, he shows himself an excellent professional in his collegiality with these other authors of books on experience. These three authors, writing in the same period and with some communication between them, acknowledge and support each other's work. There is a commendable graciousness here and a shared sense of a common undertaking in seeking to rethink and rehabilitate experience. This is all the more commendable given that they at the same time differ considerably from each other in what they want to see return as the ideal model of experience.

Ankersmit endorses Ireland's *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience* for its incisive critique of the subaltern reliance on immediate experience, a generous gesture indeed because Ireland's criticism concerns the self-deceived nature of appeals to the accessibility and certainty of direct experience, a different version of Ankersmit's own answer to the predicament of experience. The title of Ireland's book is somewhat misleading in that its ostensible main topic—the appeal to immediate experience by subalterns—turns out to be a single chapter largely on E. P. Thompson with a reference to other social historians (such as the practitioners of *Alltagsgeschichte*) and a suggestion of how their orientation

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<sup>9</sup> Not all Romanticism, of course, is like this, but the emptiness of rhetoric is sometimes evident in surprising places, as is the case with Nietzsche's idea of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Ankersmit's Romantic notion of direct historical experience also results in a significant factual error. Although sublime historical experience, like *Erlebnis* in general, is often triggered by some quotidian experience, in Ankersmit's book there is one striking exception to this principle. He tells us that the French Revolution traumatized some observers, ushering in an entirely new way of thinking about history; in Germany, he says, it reoriented historical writing to produce German historicism (which he calls "historism") and its relativist appreciation of cultural and historical differences. Ankersmit does not seem to know that this historicism well precedes the French Revolution. The single most thoroughgoing theoretical statement of German historicism is Herder's essay of 1770, "Auch einer Philosophie der Geschichte." In the case of Herder, the Revolution in fact brings out the universalist, Enlightenment streak that was also evident in his writings. On these aspects of Nietzsche and Herder, see Harold Mah, *Enlightenment Phantasies: Cultural Identity in France and Germany, 1750–1914* (Ithaca, NY, 2003).



extends into the “neo-tribal” identity politics of the 1980s. The analysis of subalterns, in other words, is very thin, and may even be misconstrued because Thompson and labor historians were not thinking in terms of “subalterns” (a term from postcolonial theory) but of a proletariat, and much of the identity politics of the 1980s, including work on subalterns, functioned in reaction to that older monocular Marxist focus.

Ireland does not attempt a detailed reconstruction and analysis of “subaltern” theory but identifies in the first chapter a general view, beginning with Thompson, of how the direct experience of oppressed groups was believed to underwrite political consciousness and agency. The remainder of the book concerns not how this belief was formulated and developed for subalterns but what Ireland believes this belief displaced, a view of mediated experience, epitomized, as Ireland identifies it, in the form of *Bildung* as described above with the omission of its idealist, teleological character, also mentioned above. After the initial chapter, the book switches to an analysis and macrohistory of the concept of experience from its putative origin at the end of the eighteenth century to the 1970s and 1980s when it gave way, he asserts, to subaltern immediacy.

Ireland offers an often perceptive discussion of the emergence and character of modern experience as *Bildung* in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth. This experience, according to Ireland, is imagined as a “dialectical” process in which a new, modern self, freed from the limitations of tradition and religion, perceives itself as an autonomous being that can and does develop through unexpected encounters, incorporating them into an evolving narrative of selfhood. The nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* is a particularly strong example of this, but we can see it as well, we might add, on a cosmic scale, in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Some well-known cases of more ironic thinking about mediated experience, such as Montaigne, do not fit well into this development, but the more serious problem for Ireland’s analysis is that to explain the development of this *Erfahrung* he connects it to a new economic order based on future-oriented fixed capital and the development of “bourgeois” self-consciousness. The logic of his version of modern mediated experience is pegged, in other words, to the logic of capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Ireland’s analysis shows all the conventional weaknesses of this kind of macrohistorical, Marxist-like analysis. The sweeping nature of the analysis

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<sup>10</sup> Initially, Ireland not very convincingly tries to qualify his argument with the disclaimer that he is speaking only of a striking “correlation” and not of a causal relationship between capitalism and this kind of experience, but the rest of the book then argues for precisely that causal relationship, showing how modern capitalism is the necessary condition of that experience’s possibility. As we will see, this is more of a logical argument than a historical one.

operates at a level of general analogy; it does not try to make the particular empirical connections that would relate generalities more concretely to the specific persons or ideas he mentions. Ireland does not show, for example, how the German figures he mentions (Herder, Goethe, Fichte, Hegel, Novalis) were actually influenced by an experience of capitalism. The fact that these men lived in a Germany where the capitalism Ireland describes was still little found and even less encountered by them seems to make no difference to what is essentially an argument about similarities in logics of experience and capitalism and not about what people actually experienced.

The weakness of Ireland's historical account of the origin of the modern mediated experience of *Bildung* points in fact to a paradox that the Germany that produced some of the most modern cases of that experience, of *Bildung* (as Ireland defines it), was socially and politically one of the less developed states and societies if measured according to both Marxist and non-Marxist modernization models. The German exponents of this new mediated experience, including the young Marx in his move away from Hegelian idealism, in fact identified this paradox—Germany's "modern" philosophical notions of selfhood arising in "backward" social conditions—as one of the perversities of German culture. With its affinities to religious awakenings such as Pietism, the appeal to immediate, revelatory experience, to *Erlebnis*, seemed a much more likely candidate to connect to Germany's social and political conditions, and conservatives who enlisted German Romanticism into their definitions of German identity attempted to establish precisely that connection to the chagrin of those on the side of a more "modern" Germany and *Bildung*.<sup>11</sup>

Ireland's macroexplanation also presents a problem for his interpretation at the end of the development he describes. This part of the interpretation places him in a tradition of discontent with what Jay calls "the crisis of experience," the view that genuine experiencing (whether mediated or immediate, depending on preference) had been hollowed out by the forces of modernity. This charge was made throughout the modern era but it became an especially strong theme for intellectuals in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth and persisted up to the present. Dewey, James, Robert Musil, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and others suffered from a sense of the desiccation of experience. Theodor Adorno, a particularly strong adherent of this view, wrote, "the marrow of experience has been sucked out; there is none, not even that apparently set at a remove from commerce, that has not been gnawed away" (quoted in Jay, 346). We might also point out that the second part of Jürgen Habermas's now much-used *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) is based on the idea of destruction of experience by capitalist

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<sup>11</sup> See Mah, *Enlightenment Phantasies*.

development, as it distorts into manipulated media communication the once putatively authentic rational discourses of the eighteenth century that Habermas idealizes in the first part of the book.

Ireland relies on a version of the destruction-of-experience thesis to explain why subaltern theory has turned to immediate experience in the last few decades. According to Ireland, capitalism has now evolved so that constantly accelerating change undercuts any prospect of incorporating one's encounters with the unexpected into a coherent narrative of *Bildung*, of the self's meaningful development. No longer viable, we might say, are the teleologies, personal and social, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ireland seems to be echoing Theodor Adorno's diagnosis of the mid-1990s that substantive culture, which requires a hardy sense of tradition, has been "replaced by the selective, disconnected, interchangeable, and ephemeral state of being informed, which . . . will promptly be cancelled by other information" (quoted in Jay, 346). Faced with the always rapidly changing and the inassimilable, people have taken to asserting a politics of immediacy, of the directly known self-experience of *Erlebnis*, to which they dogmatically cling as their only defense against the uncertainties of the present.

Again, Ireland's contention that this general development of capitalism lies behind subaltern appeals to *Erlebnis* is unsupported by any analysis of particular cases. I would especially be interested to know how E. P. Thompson (the person Ireland repeatedly names as emblematic) responded to this kind of capitalist macrodevelopment as opposed to the Cold War, the history of international communism, his own interests in Romantic literature, and the debates within English Marxism in which Thompson opposed the influence of Continental philosophy (Jay is excellent on these debates). Ireland's reliance on the "destruction of experience" also leaves him in a particularly unhappy version of the predicament of experience. Appealing to immediate experience, the subaltern is fated by breakaway capitalism to be defeated, left deluded and helpless, unable to process let alone effectively act on the world. But Ireland and those who believe in the destruction of experience are stuck in a not much better situation. They clearly endorse the kind of experience they see at the putative origins of modernity, as Habermas for example does with his idealized public sphere of the eighteenth century. This is an ideal that they believed was once real and that is not just lost, but by implication permanently lost, as their analysis of the victory of capitalism has totally erased the conditions of its possibility. And, unlike the Marxism of an earlier era which saw capitalism collapsing on its own contradictions, there is no indication (with one faint exception) in these writings of any such possibility.<sup>12</sup> The difference between the subaltern, on the one hand,

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<sup>12</sup> The one indication, an allusion to Marxist wishfulness, is in the title in the prefix to the word modernity. Following the one-time Marxist description of twentieth-century capitalism as "late" capitalism, Ireland calls his modernity "late"—why it is is never

and Ireland and similar commentators, on the other, is that the latter understand their isolation and helplessness in the contemporary world.

I think one might safely conclude that although he does not announce himself as such, Ireland is leftist in orientation, a once-Marxist or neo-Marxist (likely of Frankfurt school inspiration), suffering from the apparent post-Cold War discrediting of Marxism. This is Marxism at an impasse, hanging onto its mode of analysis but without the teleology that once sustained it. Martin Jay should share some of that history. His career started when 1960s and 1970s leftism was strong in the universities and he made his mark writing the first and still the major history in English of the Frankfurt School. Like Ankersmit, Jay endorses Ireland's book, but Jay has opted in his own book for an analysis and conclusion very different from Ireland's. Jay does not offer a single, macrohistorical explanation of the history of experience. The desire to do justice to the thought precludes tying a multiplicity of views to a single all-encompassing schema of history. Jay, as we have noted, offers contextualization of some ideas of experience, but he is also skeptical of contextualizations that do not address the fullness or complexity of the ideas. He resists any attempt to derive ideas in a sweeping manner from any order of phenomena outside of those ideas themselves. There is no assertion of the impasses of capitalism; where relevant, Jay is careful to talk about theorists' view of those impasses, but he does not tie his own hands claiming those beliefs as his own. Jay comes to terms with the collapse of the Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretation of the 1960s and 1970s in another manner, one that recuperates his original leftist concern into the content of his book, the staggering complexity of manifold ideas of experience, and turns both into an answer to that complexity, to the predicament of experience.

Jay's analyses of theorists move reliably, if occasionally monotonously, from an assessment of the strengths of a particular view to an assessment of its weaknesses. The exposition follows this general pattern, with two notable exceptions: at the beginning of the book Montaigne, whom we have seen above interpreted in Jay's terms, and near the end of the book Theodor Adorno. Adorno is the recurring

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established. This gesture in twentieth-century Marxist writing arose to indicate how capitalism had not quite become what had Marx expected but still indicated a belief in Marxist teleology—in the ultimate course of its development to its demise. The same significance is carried over in calling modernity late but now even more problematically, since that teleology and predicted demise seem even more unlikely. How can one know if capitalist modernity is now in its “late” stage? It might just be in an “early” stage or a “middle” one of finally globalizing itself as Marx predicted prematurely in the 1840s. There is no way to determine such stages without some assumption about the overall course of capitalist development, precisely what Ireland's book says is now unknowable. That predictive knowledge is precisely what Marxist teleology guaranteed, and that guarantee is now gone.

figure of intellectual concern in Jay's career, central to his first book and revisited in others as well as in essays. We have noted Jay's gesture in his Introduction in which he informs us of the book's indeterminate trajectory, its lack of a foreseeable terminus. But, as I suggested, the book still offers something of a conclusion, and once given Jay's exegesis of Adorno, we can see that the conclusion, if not the ending, is in fact a revisiting of the opening consideration of Montaigne.

The treatment of Adorno is an elegant minuet of critical appreciation, weaving through well-known themes in Adorno's work, including the idea of the destruction of experience, but also pointing out the refinements and exceptions in Adorno's thought, so that another Adorno appears, quite different from the dire pessimist that seems to inform Ireland's analysis. This other Adorno seems to have addressed all the issues of *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. An opponent of a reductionist transcendentalist–rationalist view of experience, he also explicitly refused subjectivist immediate experience (whether of Romantics such as Schleiermacher or of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl). Following his friend Walter Benjamin, he lamented the modern “destruction of experience,” but he resisted Benjamin's occasional turn to mysticism. A critic of capitalism, he rejected the appeal to immediate political experience for its own sake which he identified as a questionable and fascistic politics of authenticity. Adorno learned from Heidegger (as did the poststructuralists) and, surprisingly, from John Dewey that experience necessarily has a passive aspect that does not have to mean the annihilation of the subject by the object (the conclusion of poststructuralists), but a subject that relates in a “non-dominating, non-subsumptive, non-homogenizing manner” (Jay, 356) to a distinctly separate external world. Adorno feared the loss of what Benjamin called the “aura” of art, but he still believed that art could hold, as he liked to quote Stendhal, “la promesse du bonheur.” Adorno, Jay writes in an appreciative passage, shows us how to experience in the contemporary world, that

the experience of reading Adorno is itself one of non-identical refusals of easy consistencies, producing the realization that experience is an openness to the unexpected with its danger and obstacles, not a safe haven from history, but a reminder of the encounters with otherness and the new that await those who, despite everything, are willing and able to embark on the voyage. (360)

This recuperation of Adorno makes him into a Montaigne for our time, and its model of embodied experience, open to the uncertainties and otherness of external encounters, is one that Jay makes into the principle of his own study, signaled in his Introduction and at work in the open-ended organization of the book.

I am not fully convinced that Jay's treatment of Adorno is enough to make us forget Adorno's high-culture elitism and gendering practices—such as his

rejection of jazz music, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, and Stefan George, all of which he characterized as castrated and effeminate. And even if Adorno were fully open to the uncertainties of otherness, as Jay suggests, that would still leave him with a problem that applies as well to his model Montaigne. Montaigne and Jay's Adorno face an unstable and contradictory flux of experience which corrodes the stability of the experiencing subject both in its point of view and in what it may conclude about its experiences. As Montaigne notes in the long quotation at the beginning of this essay, his constantly varying experiences render selfhood unstable ("I am then another self"), always in "its apprenticeship," always "on trial." This is the lesson he draws from his experiences but what should be noted is that *how* he tells us this lesson contradicts the lesson itself. He describes his uncertain, inconsistent, destabilizing experiences from a point of view that does not embody those experiences but in fact operates despite them. The narrator in Montaigne's essays displays a remarkable, consistent equanimity, an unchanging stoicism that allows the narrator to reach assured, reasonable conclusions about himself. He knows what to seek and what to avoid, whom to trust and distrust, what will upset his digestion, and so on. The stoic narrator, in other words, trumps the destabilizing experiences that constitutes it and offers itself in fact as a prophylaxis against such experiences. This stable, stoic narrating self is what Jay admires in Montaigne and a version of it characterizes Jay's Adorno, whose recognition of the uncertain nature of experience produces a Montaigne-like knowingness that yields for Adorno openness to further experience.<sup>13</sup> But does this persona—the stable, stoic narrating self—make sense given these writers' characterization of unstable experience? If experience is so uncertain how could a stable stoicism or a calm knowingness and optimism result, either in real life or as a valid representation of the person in question?

This contradiction becomes more evident if we realize that there is no reason why one must respond to the uncertainties of experience with calm poise and openness to further experience. One might just as easily despair, become manic or paranoid or schizophrenic. Instead of Montaigne's essays think of Rousseau's *Confessions* and Daniel Schreber's memoirs as responses to the vagaries of experience. That there is no necessity to Montaigne's (or Adorno's, or for that matter Jay's) resulting equanimity and openness means that the preference for it is not just arbitrary but smuggles back in an assumption of stable benevolent selfhood to master unsettled experiences. This stoic self is just assumed as a piece of humanist wisdom as these writers fall back to a classical and early

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<sup>13</sup> Montaigne, who believed—wrongly—that he was near the end of his life, does not assume anything particularly new and unexpected will happen to him. His advanced years here cancel out further susceptibility to uncertain experience, as he knows how he will respond to a wide range of situations.

modern trope of reassurance. Scott's position, her answer to the predicament of experience, would have us avoid defaulting to humanist wisdom, keeping instead the irresolvable nature of the predicament in fuller, more consistent view. But although I might take Scott's side in this debate, my own experiences tell me that we may be entering a new cycle of disciplinary norms, when experience might again be taken for granted. In such a circumstance, even though Jay cannot fully justify his point of view, his version of experience—hard-earned, stoical, appreciative of complexity, skeptical of monomaniacal views—is still by far our best guide.