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Review: Ebb Tide

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## EBB TIDE

This is what I find so absolutely suffocating about contemporary culture: it has become utterly incapable of any authentic and immediate contact with the world. . . .<sup>1</sup>

SUBLIME HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE. By F. R. Ankersmit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. Pp. xviii, 481.

For the last decade or so, recognition has been spreading that the linguistic turn that had motivated much advanced work in the humanities is over. The massive tide of language that connected analytic philosophy with pragmatism, anthropology with social history, philosophy of science with deconstruction, has receded; we are now able to look across the sand to see what might be worth salvaging before the next waves of theory and research begin to pound the shore. As language recedes there is much of talk of ethics, but also intensity; of postcolonialism, but also empire; of the sacred, but also cosmopolitanism; of trauma, but also animals. Much of the work in these areas shares with F. R. Ankersmit's latest book a desire to be free of the prison house of language. Even in the heyday of pantextualism there was a sense for many that beyond the borders of language lay the sublime. Discourse about the sublime, however, was contained or limited by the notion that you shouldn't try to say too much about something that was supposed to lie beyond the borders of language. In *Sublime Historical Experience*, the author has thrown off this reticence famously characterized by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Ankersmit wants to find a way to write about the unrepresentable. As himself a mighty contributor to post-modern history and theory (often in the pages of this journal), he engages in this enterprise fully aware of its paradoxical features.

Ankersmit addresses the question of why we want to represent the past in the first place. He is asking why we are moved by the past, why the past becomes a problem for people (or collectivities) at particular times. Before language, he argues, there is experience, and now that the delight in language's prison-house has worn thin, he aims to articulate how the experience of the past (or, the feeling that the experience of the past has been lost) first becomes a problem—perhaps a subject—for the historian who then attempts to represent the past (tell a history) in a text.

Ankersmit informs the reader early in the book that his is a "supremely impractical" study (xv). He is not offering anything that would help practicing

1. F. R. Ankersmit, "Invitation to Historians," *Rethinking History* 7 (2003), 419.

historians do their job more effectively, although he will offer advice as to how the paradoxes in our relation to the past should work their way into writing history. He is not interested in the cognitive dimensions of historical representation, nor is he concerned with why some modes of history-writing are superior to others. He is interested in why we are aware of there having been a past at all (xv); he wants to explore the “state of mind” of someone who is led to or drawn to the past. His notion of a “sublime historical experience” is meant to describe how the past becomes a felt issue, thus showing the origin of historical consciousness itself. Although there may not be any practical scholarly consequences in the concept of the origin of our interest in the past, Ankersmit does believe that he will be showing that once a culture enters into historical consciousness, living without the past would mean committing an act of the deepest violence against itself (xv).

In order to clear the ground for his investigation of an experience of the past that gives rise to representation itself, Ankersmit presents chapter-length criticisms of Richard Rorty and Hans Georg Gadamer. In both cases he has enormous intellectual affinities with the philosopher he is taking on. Ankersmit finds heroic Rorty’s use of history against his colleagues in analytic philosophy. This is the Rorty who gave up on epistemology, and who powerfully deconstructed the ideal of the philosopher as a cultural referee. His story of the history of philosophy punctured the myths of timelessness and the quest for an ultimate truth; he ironically deflated the cognitive claims of his fellow philosophers and ultimately concluded that edification—not objectivity—was the payoff of the genre of writing they practiced. Ankersmit applauds this ironic storytelling, but he is affronted by Rorty’s “failure” to spare a notion of experience from his deflationary gaze. It’s not that Rorty denies that we have experiences, but just as language “goes all the way down” to color any kind of knowledge claims, language also is there to block access to the “immediacy of experience.” Ankersmit wants that immediacy; he seems to think it important that there be a realm immune from the contamination of language. More problematically, he wants to write about it.

Ankersmit is right to underscore that Rorty would have none of this. The author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* thinks that this notion of “immediacy” makes little sense, and that in any case we don’t need it to do any work. Ankersmit doesn’t argue against Rorty here; instead he makes the odd claim that if you care about history, then you can’t stay on the path that Rorty has cleared.<sup>2</sup> Your care about history should trump Rorty’s critique, and you must hold onto your care, your faith in the importance of the past, against all reason.

Ankersmit writes in the mode of a disappointed colleague or follower: *You came so close to seeing the truth, yet you did not arrive at the notion of sublime historical experience*. Ankersmit likes italics. He actually writes that Rorty “must strangely remind us of Moses, who was not allowed to enter the land that he

2. For another attempt to preserve the distinctiveness of historical practice from Rorty’s deflationary mode, see John H. Zammito, “Rorty, ‘Historicism’ and the Practice of History: A Polemic,” in *Rethinking History* 10:1 (2006), 9–48. See also my “Thin Description: Richard Rorty’s Use of History,” in *The Ironist’s Cage: Memory, Trauma and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), an earlier version of which was published in these pages (review essay of Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, History and Theory* 29 [1990], 339–357).

himself had promised to the people of Israel” (66). The Promised Land flows with the milk and honey of experience, and Rorty just can’t get there because, according to Ankersmit, he is sidetracked by the anti-historicism of Donald Davidson. It may be true that Rorty’s “thin descriptions” make him less useful to historians than some other writers, but this can’t be allowed to excuse Ankersmit’s crude identification of the pragmatist as yet another Anglo-Saxon who hasn’t had to open himself up to the tragic dimensions of real history:

Rorty’s oeuvre is an illustration of the general rule that however much an American scholar may have read Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer or Foucault, when you scratch the surface sooner or later an Enlightened and anti-historicist Jeffersonian liberal will appear who is largely insensitive to the drama and the tragedy that is so much the essence of the past. (64)

Ankersmit even goes on to write that “historicism and a sensitivity of the full weight of history has, in fact, always remained an affair of the European continent” (64). This “affair” evidently allows the historical theorist from Groningen to seize the essence of the past. What Ankersmit calls the “Anglo-Saxon mind” just hasn’t experienced enough tragedy, evidently. As is usual in this type of argument, where the rest of the world fits just doesn’t matter.

Why does Ankersmit suddenly lose his theoretical sophistication and engage in crude stereotyping? He wants to use Rorty (and also Gadamer) to argue for a mode of interpretation that undermines what is often called a positivist approach to knowledge. But he also wants to talk about a romantic, quasi-mystical feeling for the past for which these thinkers are less useful:

Historians should learn to trust their most private and most intimate feelings on those rare occasions when what Huizinga called “the grace of historical experience” is given to them. They should realize that the best, the most sophisticated, and the most finely tuned instrument that they have at their disposal for understanding the past is themselves and their own experience. (67)

Trust your feelings not your thinking. But, as in almost all philosophical appeals to experience, in the end only some forms of experience will do. The effort to champion immediacy conceals a judgment that rejects as inappropriate that tainted by mediation. So, just after Ankersmit tells historians to trust their experience, he adds the caveat that they should do so only if their experience hasn’t been “infected by the disciplinary historiographical epidemics . . . infecting a majority of their colleagues” (67). This is precisely the kind of move that Rorty exposed in his critical work. Philosophers (like politicians and clergy) who appeal to experience in general will usually introduce some distinctions that allow them to champion the kind of experiences they find most useful. Under the rubric of the value of immediacy, of untainted experience, normative judgments reappear.

After showing that neither Rorty nor Gadamer provide the philosophic path that continues into the Promised Land of experience, Ankersmit turns to Huizinga’s practice of history to illuminate what it means to eliminate transcendentalism and all its traces (105). The problems of transcendentalism can be avoided if one eschews talk of the representation of the past in favor of the experience of the past. In order to do this, Ankersmit posits that “the past *itself*” has survived in

certain objects, and that the practice of the historian leads to the experience of this past. It's not that one has transcended time through language or mysticism, but that "the past can properly be said to be present in the artifacts that it has left to us" (115). He wants this presence to be no less reasonable than the "presence" of earlier stellar events to an astronomer, but he is led to a language very different from that found in the physical sciences:

All spatial and temporal demarcations have momentarily been lifted; it is as if the temporal trajectory between past and present, instead of separating the two, has become the locus of their encounter. Historical experience pulls the faces of the past and present together in a short but ecstatic kiss. Historical experience is, in this way, a "surface" phenomenon: it takes place on the surface or interface where the historian and the past meet each other. (121)

Huizinga's *ekstasis* is light years from Rorty's ironic presentism, but Ankersmit follows the sentences just quoted with the defensive reassurance: "But this certainly does not imply that we have now entered the domain of mysticism and irrationality" (121). It seems to this reader that this is precisely the domain that Ankersmit has been forced to enter, for this is the only alternative he has left himself after rejecting pragmatism, hermeneutics, and the problematics of representation.<sup>3</sup>

Ankersmit is drawn to Huizinga's discussion of how an encounter with history can change one's perspective on both present and past. Normally, this encounter is framed or mediated by many factors, including the contexts of scholarship and popular culture. But Ankersmit is interested in those moments of revolutionary rupture when "the historian momentarily 'forgets' the historiographical context within which he normally operates" (125): "For a moment there is only the past itself, revealing to him its quasi-noumenal nakedness with an unusual directness and immediacy. And the same can be said for the past, the object of historical experience: It hurries toward the historian with the same eagerness to rupture its ties with what surrounds it, as is the case of the historian" (125).

"Wherefore art thou, history?," Ankersmit is asking, but I found myself asking how we might escape from this attempt to bring this sort of mystical romanticism to the rescue of theory in the name of authentic experience.

Ankersmit is attracted to Huizinga's "call of the past" because this call is supposed to be direct and immediate. That's why the former spends so much energy arguing against contextualization as a feature of historical experience. For him, authentic experience is ecstatic, and it must be both fragmentary yet forceful. He calls it a kiss, but he says it's a "short kiss." Paying attention to context (either one's own, or the context of a moment in the past) means being open to mediation. You won't be able to hear the call of the past if you are distracted by the music (or noise) of the discourse surrounding you and it. Ankersmit makes much use of Baudelaire and Benjamin, two writers who knew one had to "undo" knowledge in order to prepare for experience. Of course, Ankersmit doesn't want to "undo" the knowledge he gains from *them*, nor the inspiration he receives from

3. Collingwood is a theorist of history for whom the category of experience is most important, but he receives no attention in this volume. Perhaps this is because Collingwood focused on the possibilities of re-experiencing the past, not on a notion of a experiential, ecstatic union with the past.

Huizinga, Rousseau, and Hölderlin. These are thinkers who appeal to him, so he claims what they say resonates with what was already inside us. They haven't contaminated readers with mediation, they have mirrored what was in "the depths of our souls." When we have our "most authentic experiences," Ankersmit writes, these will appear to us as "something that had been inscribed in our minds a long time ago already" (188, 371). Can this usually astute critical writer have so lost his bearings to think that his encounter (and ours) with the past is not mediated by the very writers from whom he wants to learn the lessons of immediacy? Does the feeling of immediacy trump all critical questioning?

Ankersmit realizes that his notion of historical experience is at odds with the professional writing of history, even though he says that the former only makes sense against the background of the latter (173). It is crucial for his argument that this connection in no way affects the radically unmediated quality of the experience. I cannot see how this is possible, but perhaps this impossibility is what Ankersmit wants to point to with his concept of *sublime* historical experience. For the word "sublime" here is meant to gesture at a region that cannot be made sense of through our normal epistemological categories. By definition the sublime (as idea or as practice) resists theorization, even though he spends roughly the second half of his book trying to evoke what this sublimity amounts to in relation to the past. Ankersmit counsels the historian to build the mutual exclusion of ecstatic experience and professional research practice into his or her writing (174). To whom is he addressing this counsel? How could one tell whether it was followed?

Ankersmit describes himself as being well aware of the "painful irony" of writing a theory against theory in this book. He has convinced himself, although he makes no attempt to convince the reader, that such a book is necessary for the liberation of historical practice. As noted above, he initially acknowledged that his was an impractical enterprise, but in later chapters he seems to believe that writers about the past can be set free from the constraints of mediation or of professional practice by his arguments or exhortations. To whom is the argument addressed, and what should be its effect? It is clear that Ankersmit wants to romanticize our relation to the past, and he emphatically recommends that historians trust *themselves* rather than *theory* (his italics, 283). Trusting oneself, for him, means being open to our capacity to experience the past as lost, to experience the tragic, mournful connection to history. "Historical experience is the resonance that the 'music of the past,' its moods and feelings, may have in the historian whose mind happens to have been written in the same key" (309). Ankersmit wants to show that experiencing the past is like experiencing a work of art. But, as he surely knows, sometimes our aesthetic education is made more profound not by finding ourselves confirmed in a work of art but in finding works of art produced in keys that we didn't know even existed.

As Martin Jay has recently shown in *Songs of Experience*, the modern philosophical project can be understood by charting how its different movements have dealt with the concept of experience.<sup>4</sup> Jay's critical explication of the major

4. Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

positions on how to understand the ways embodied consciousness interacts with the world is helpful for situating Ankersmit's attempt to invigorate the notions of experience and the sublime *vis à vis* the encounter with the past. In the last section of his book, Jay discusses how three major intellectual movements of the last century have reconsidered the concept of experience in relation to the changes brought by modernity: pragmatism, critical theory (the Frankfurt School version), and poststructuralism. Ankersmit draws on all three movements in developing his notion of sublime experience.

Among the pragmatists, James and Dewey were inspired by Emerson to develop a robust concept of experience that would not depend on a powerful self or homogeneous subject having the experience. The pragmatists emphasized experience as a kind of never-ending experiment, a way of trying things without being committed to how it should all turn out in the end. Jay is attracted to their vision, but, like Ankersmit, he is also critical of Rorty's contemporary appropriation of it. Rorty de-romanticizes the pragmatist quest when he emphasizes the mediated nature of all supposed encounters with otherness. Of course there is otherness out there, Rorty argues; but when we have experiences, we bring that otherness "in here"—that is, into our linguistic or conceptual schemes. Rorty challenges our celebration of otherness by emphasizing how we must make things our own. This is where Ankersmit sees the corrupting influence of Donald Davidson; for the Dutch historian, this is where Rorty (remember, his Moses figure) falls for the golden calf of linguistic mediation. For the American philosopher, no doubt hampered by what Ankersmit called the Anglo-Saxon failure to appreciate tragedy, we just don't have to worry about the purity of experience. Impure experience, for Rorty, whether mixed up with language, concepts, the influence of others . . . impure experience is good enough.

Like Ankersmit, Jay prefers the pathos and politics of German critical theory to the ironic nominalism of Rorty's version of pragmatism. Benjamin longed for a notion of experience in its unity, a unity that has been lost in the fracturing of modernity. But even if he struggled toward a redemptive perspective, Benjamin knew that there was no possibility of simply recovering an imagined wholeness from the past. Instead, he wanted to find *through* the shocks and traumas of modernity a path to a new form of experience that would acknowledge both passive and active dimensions of encountering the fullness of the world. Ankersmit notes approvingly that Benjamin understood that an experience of the past "can come into being only as a figure of loss" (189). Both Jay and Ankersmit are also attracted to Adorno's idea that our aesthetic experience can remind us both of this loss, and of what our lives might yet be. Art can keep our hopes alive for a radical openness to the unexpected (146).<sup>5</sup> But Adorno furiously resisted the wholeness, the consoling kiss, to which Ankersmit always returns, and for that reason our author thinks he must go beyond Adorno's "openly Hegelian" view (146).

Adorno refused immediacy and consolation, and to go "beyond" him Ankersmit develops the idea of experience without a subject. This is a notion of experience that picks up on some of the themes in contemporary trauma studies, a field that

5. See *ibid.*, 344ff.

has (at least in the humanities) developed in the wake of poststructuralism's critique of subjectivity. During the decline of grand theory in the early 1990s, deconstruction and its derivative forms were repeatedly charged with nihilism and political impotence. In response, thinkers interested in "theory" attempted to move from a skeptical critique of representation to an engagement with the real. In this regard the concept of trauma was very useful, because it seemed to connect one to the real without either the filters of consciousness or the mediation of culture. Trauma seemed to trump mediation.<sup>6</sup> Eelco Runia has recently called trauma the "busiest and liveliest speak-easy" in an era when there was otherwise a ban on speculative philosophy of history aimed at meaning-making. "Exploring trauma," Runia concludes, "is the substantive philosophy of history of modern days."<sup>7</sup> This is exploration that for Ankersmit dovetails with the sublime.

In his chapter on "the post-structuralist reconstitution of experience," Jay noted the similarities between Roland Barthes's idea of a photograph's *punctum* and the productive shock that Ankersmit sees at the core of sublime historical experience.<sup>8</sup> Countless writers have by now connected the precognitive prick of the punctum with the meaning they can make out of the traumatic. Moreover, we can see the connection between Ankersmit's longing for immediacy (his "naked noumenal") with the desire for an ecstatic limit experience that was powerfully magnetic for Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault. For all these authors, according to Jay, experience can only be rehabilitated if it is preserved from context, language, and all the mediations (read contaminations) of contemporary culture. They want their experience to be beyond the ordinary, to be beyond language. For Ankersmit, this is where trauma and the sublime can enter: "In sum, trauma can be seen as the psychological counterpart of the sublime, and the sublime can be seen as the philosophical counterpart of trauma" (338). Trauma and the sublime serve as reminders of an immediacy we have lost, of a world that can be more or less awkwardly represented, but that cannot be fully reflected in writing about the past.

It is important to acknowledge, as Ankersmit does, that historical representation always involves some loss, always is at some distance from the reality it aims to remember. Indeed, I have argued that all historical representation is a form of forgetting, and that trauma represents an occurrence that will not be forgotten precisely because it cannot be remembered through the conventional channels of recall.<sup>9</sup> This is why traumatic flashbacks are not a form of recollection, not

6. See the Introduction to *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001); see also Roth, *The Ironist's Cage*, and "Trauma Representation and Historical Consciousness," *Common Knowledge* 7 (1998), 99-111. Trauma studies is a field that continues to grow by leaps and bounds. Dominick LaCapra's work over the last decade or so connects the field to theory of history, and Ruth Leys's *On Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) offers a critical intellectual history of the concept. E. Ann Kaplan's *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Literature and Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005) connects trauma-talk to our post 9/11 concerns.

7. Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory* 45:1 (2006), 4.

8. Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 390.

9. See, for example, "Trauma, Representation and Historical Consciousness," and "You Must Remember This: History, Memory and Trauma in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*," in *The Ironist's Cage*. See



a part of historical consciousness. "Modern historical consciousness arises," Ankersmit correctly points out, "from the experience of the discrepancy between the perspective of the past and that of the present" (357).<sup>10</sup> But he dreams of going beyond modern historical consciousness, beyond historical language; he seems to think that by acknowledging a sublime experience one can erase or overcome the discrepancy between present and past. When this unity is felt, he really believes that one is discovering "something that had been inscribed in our minds a long time ago already" (188, 371). Ankersmit here substitutes the mirror of the soul for the mirror of nature that Rorty deconstructed.

The last pages of *Sublime Historical Experience* offer the author's own translation of passages from Hölderlin's *Hyperion* because he thinks the poem transcends the dichotomies of modernity through a love that both acknowledges difference and overwhelms it. The dream of a beautiful trauma, of an immediate fluidity with the world, is much older than modernity. Ankersmit self-consciously offers a romanticized version of this mystical dream in an effort to leave self-consciousness behind. Recently, in an autobiographical essay for *Rethinking History*, he expressed his frustration with a culture that cites names of theorists and writers but never has an urgent connection to the world itself. "We are a generation of epigones . . . because for some perverse reason truly original work has become impossible."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this book is his attempt to break out of the realm of the epigone, and Ankersmit has produced a brave, excessive volume. However, it is in the end an awkward and labored exhortation to become unmediated. I cannot imagine how one might successfully respond to this plea, since any response would be by definition mediated by the plea. Ankersmit is too smart not to realize this, and I suppose he pursued the project in any case as an example of the paradoxical impossibility of the sublime.

As the tide of language recedes, we may find many things, but I can't see that purity and a direct connection to the world through something deep and authentic in our souls is among them. For there is no recuperation of the immediate, and trauma is not a foundation for historical theory. The theorist's footnotes do not inspire the mystical embrace for which he seems to write, and for which he seems genuinely to long. Instead, *Sublime Historical Experience* is a reminder of how difficult it is to evoke what we have lost without diluting it, and how challenging it is to try to tell a memorable story of what we have chosen to recollect.

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also Robert Dawidoff, "History...But," in *History And...: Histories Within the Human Sciences*, ed. Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 370-381.

10. For a historical account of this issue in Western Europe and the United States, see Peter Frizsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

11. Ankersmit, "Invitation to Historians," 421.