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Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. Berkeley:

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Martin Jay introduces his masterful and ambitious study of the history of the concept of experience in modern thought by declaring: "'Experience,' it turns out, is a signifier that unleashes remarkable emotion in many who put special emphasis on it in their thought" (1). But why entitle the book "Songs of Experience"? Jay is aware of the apparent conceit in using this title of William Blake's poem cycle. But he intends it as an act of homage. "The temptation to borrow Blake's title is irresistible" because it perfectly fits his project: "[M]y intention is not to provide yet another account of what 'experience' really is or might be, but rather to understand why so many thinkers have felt compelled to do precisely that. Many, if not all, have done so with an urgency and intensity that rarely accompanies the attempt to define or explicate a concept. There has been, I hope to show, as much 'songs' of passion as sober analyses" (1).

When Jay speaks of his experience of writing this book, he draws upon one of the German words that are translated as "experience," *Erfahrung* (frequently contrasted with *Erlebnis*). Jay notes that *Fahrt* (journey) is embedded in *Erfahrung*, a word that is also linked with the German word for danger (*Gefahr*). Jay's journey is filled with unexpected turns, risks, and dangers. Jay is sensitive to the criticisms that have been advanced against the appeal to experience by such thinkers as Richard Rorty and Joan W. Scott. Scott, for example, claims that the belief that shared experience serves as the ultimate ground of cultural differences "undermines any attempt to explore the impersonal processes that construct the subject in the first place" (3). Despite her adamant denial of any foundational authority to the term, Scott declares that "*experience* is not a word we can do without, although given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and redefine its meaning" (3-4).

I want to outline Jay's project in order to orient a more detailed discussion of some of his songs of experience. He begins with a brief survey of the concept of experience from the Greeks to Montaigne and Bacon. In classical thought, the concept of experience played a relatively modest role. Jay's

adventure really begins with Montaigne and Bacon. Montaigne's reflections on experience may even be said to define one of the poles of modern discourse about experience. We find affinities between Montaigne and phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (who greatly admired Montaigne), hermeneuticians such as Gadamer, and even such pragmatists as James and Dewey. Montaigne never attempts to define or "manage" experience. Rather he proceeds by anecdote, illustration, comparison, passing remarks: a "method" intended to illustrate the untidiness, the diversity, and the transient character of experience. Experience is filled with paradoxes, ironies, and disappointments. Montaigne exhibits a remarkable serenity in learning to live with contingency, uncertainty and ambiguity. But despite Montaigne's humanistic moderation, he was an "inadequate model for modern man at his most restless and ambitious . . . [Modern thinkers] wanted to move into a world and scrutinize it instead in the hope of finding new and reliable knowledge that would help master what had hitherto been outside of human control" (28). Bacon and Descartes exemplified this new spirit. Experience for them is to be judged insofar as it contributes to or inhibits the advancement of genuine scientific knowledge. Jay observes that "[t]he scientific version, based on a transcendental, disembodied, immortal species subject located more in impartial instruments than fallible bodies, activated the etymological link . . . between experience and experiment, while suppressing the value of accumulated wisdom from the past." This sets the background for the *epistemological* concern with experience that dominated the eighteenth century.

Jay traces the central debates about the cognitive understanding of experience in the works of Locke, Hume and Kant. It is against this epistemological background (frequently caricatured by subsequent thinkers) that the other modalities of experience were articulated. Jay then explores the attempts to characterize moral and religious experience (Schleiermacher, James, Otto, and Buber). He passes on to art and aesthetic experience ("From Kant to Dewey"); political experience (Burke, Oakeshott, and the English Marxists); and historical experience (Dilthey, Collingwood, Scott, and Ankersmit).

After this exploration of the different specialized modalities of experience, Jay turns "to attempts made by a wide range of thinkers in the last century to heal what they lamented in the ruptures of experience and generate or recover a more holistic alternative, restoring -- at least to a certain extent -- the outlook of Montaigne" (39). In the second part of the book, Jay explores the debate about experience in the American pragmatic tradition (James, Dewey, and Rorty); the lament about the crisis of experience (Benjamin and Adorno); and finally, the poststructuralist reconstitution of experience (Bataille, Barthes, and Foucault).

The range of these songs of experience is breathtaking. Frequently, where we would like to pause in order to listen more carefully to nuances and shading, we are rapidly hurried on to the next cycle. But one can also begin to discern the dynamic overarching direction of Jay's journey. I would characterize his project as quasi-Hegelian -- and the qualifying "*quasi*" is crucial. Unlike Hegel, Jay disclaims any overall synthetic unity. There is no grand *Aufhebung*. Unlike Hegel, Jay does not want to suggest that each moment or stage in this development is integrated into the next stage. Nevertheless, we can discern a basic structure that bears a strong affinity to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. With Montaigne we discover the outlines of a holistic conception of experience. Structurally, this is like Hegel's invocation of the naïve holism of the early Greek *Sittlichkeit* and culture. We cannot remain satisfied with this naïve holism. There is a "necessity" to pass beyond it -- and this passing beyond leads to a process of diremption, fragmentation, and specialization. We also come to appreciate the one-sidedness of the isolated modalities of experience. In the twentieth century, a variety of thinkers seek "to heal what they lamented as the ruptures of experience and generate or recover a more holistic alternative . . . (39). (The very language of "rupture," "healing," and "holism" owes a great deal to Hegel.) We, the readers, participate in this journey -- as we do with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* -- a journey that Hegel calls *Erfahrung*. Jay, like Hegel, seeks to bring forth the "truth" that is implicit in the changing conceptions of experience -- even when they are incompatible with each other. He enables us to appreciate the insights (and limitations) of thinkers as they struggle to articulate what they take to be most vital about experience.

In a short review one cannot do justice to the richness of Jay's text, but I do want to give an example of one of his most illuminating song cycles, "Politics and Experience." We can see here the perplexities that break out in any attempt to give a satisfactory account of experience. Jay presents the challenge thrust in the face of those who appeal to a politics of experience:

"A politics of experience," warns an eminent feminist critic, "is inevitably a conservative politics." Rather than a check against ideology, adds a prominent Marxist theorist, experience is "ideology's homeland." "Experience," observes a third commentator, was routinely elevated above "analysis" by defenders of "reactionary modernism" in Germany. (170)

In a long tradition dating back to Burke (and even earlier), conservative thinkers have appealed to the funded wisdom of experience. They have been suspicious of abstraction, the appeal to universal principles -- and to what is frequently called "rationalism." But it is also true, as a matter of empirical fact, that there have been progressive and radical thinkers who have appealed to a politics of experience. There is another way of interpreting the claim that a politics of experience is necessarily conservative. Despite the "noble" intentions of progressive thinkers, the appeal to experience "inadvertently

produces conservative outcomes" (170). This accusation was made and debated with intense vehemence by twentieth-century English Marxists.

Jay singles out the conservative thinker Michael Oakeshott, who is famous for his critique of "rationalism in politics." Rationalism, as he understood it, favors what is abstract and untested over the concrete wisdom of experience. Rationalism presents itself as enlightened, but it is politically dangerous: it is the source of most of the evils in modern and contemporary life. Oakeshott attacks the tradition that began with Bacon and Descartes because it instigated the pernicious faith in the "sovereignty of technique." His critique of "instrumental reason" echoes many of the arguments that we find in the left thinkers of the Frankfurt School. It also bears a resemblance to Heidegger's critique of *Gestell* (*Enframing*). Ironically, Oakeshott's notion of experience was given a progressive twist. Employing a concept of experience similar to Oakeshott's, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson drew upon the *radical* political experience of the working class. Thompson's monumental *The Making of the English Working Class* transformed the writing of social history into a "history from below" and sought to "recover the lost experience of those forgotten by history" (196). Jay takes up the bitter fights that broke out between the "humanist" radical thinkers who appealed to political experience and the younger more "theoretical" generation (e.g., Perry Anderson and Terry Eagleton) who were influenced by the structural Marxism of Althusser. The "humanists" were accused of being fuzzy-minded "sentimental romantics," lacking analytic finesse and tough-minded theoretical rigor. They failed to grasp the way in which the appeal to experience is essentially ideological. Thompson's response was no less vigorous in its polemical attack on the "poverty of theory." Jay does a splendid job of summarizing the key moves and counter-moves in this intense debate. But it would be foolish to think that there was a clear victor in this battle. Williams and Thompson finally acknowledged some of the crucial ambiguities in the meaning of experience, and the grand theoretical claims made in the name of a "scientific" Marxism simply collapsed.

What do we learn from this battle over the politics of experience? First, appeals to experience -- depending on historical context -- can be used to "justify" conservative and progressive options. Second, the "truth" implicit in the claims of the defenders of political experience (whether right or left) is that one can learn from the collective practical wisdom of accumulated experience. But there is also a "truth" in the arguments of those who claim that experience can harbor deep ideological prejudices and distortions that need to be brought out into the open and subjected to rigorous critique. Furthermore, we discover something that crops up in *any* attempt to do justice to experience: the need to preserve a proper tension between the subject of experience (the *experiencing*) and the object of experience (the *experienced*). Jay generalizes this point:

For as we have seen in the cases of cognitive, religious, aesthetic, and political experience, unless some sort of tension is preserved between the subject of experience and the object -- whether it be nature, God, things of beauty, or political goals -- there is a danger of losing precisely the very encounter with otherness and the moment of passivity that are so deeply embedded in the concept of experience in most of its guises. (221)

In the second part of the book, Jay considers a variety of thinkers who attempt to overcome the fragmentation that resulted from the concentration of specialized modes of experience in order to develop an all-encompassing notion. He writes, "Hoping to recapture a more robust, intense, and all-encompassing notion of experience -- whether it be called 'authentic' or 'essential,' or 'pure' or 'inner' -- they sought to reverse the process of differentiation. Often betraying a sense of nostalgia for what had purportedly been lost by modalization, they hoped to make whole, reinvigorating a common life-world that had relinquished its coherent meaning with the development of subcultures of expertise" (263). At a very abstract level, one can see Jay's point. Yet when we turn to the details of his final three chapters, one seriously wonders whether twentieth-century thinkers have recaptured "a more robust, intense, and all-encompassing notion of experience." The best case for making this claim is to be found in the reconstruction of experience by the American pragmatists.

One of Jay's most significant achievements is his recovery of the importance of the American pragmatic tradition. Pragmatism has been so badly caricatured that it is a pleasure to read Jay's insightful discussion. He understands that the heart of pragmatism is a rethinking and reconstruction of experience -- one that does full justice to its cognitive, scientific, aesthetic, religious, political and historical dimensions. Jay discusses the importance of James for our understanding of religious experience and Dewey's contribution to a balanced view of aesthetic experience. For Dewey there is a rhythm that is internal to what he called "having an experience": a rhythm involving a tension and a conflict that need to be resolved. If it is successfully resolved, then a new integration and wholeness are achieved. This consummation is what Dewey identifies as the aesthetic moment in the rhythm of experience. There is no ultimate finality, only a continuous dynamic rhythm. Aesthetic experience is not a special type of realm of experience. Rather it is a distinctive pervasive quality that can characterize any experience -- including scientific inquiry and practical activity. Dewey was particularly sensitive to the need to overcome the rigid epistemological and metaphysical dichotomy between subject and object that has plagued so much of modern thought. The distinction between what is subjective and objective arises within experience. Dewey's conception of experience can be viewed as a naturalized and pluralized version of the Hegelian conception of *Erfahrung*. Experience is the transaction of an *agent-patient* with its environment. The pragmatists integrate the passive, suffering, undergoing

dimension of experience with its active, experimental aspect. Pathos (undergoing) and agency are inextricably related. They also maintain the creative tension between *experiencing* and the *experienced*. The pragmatists integrate the contingent fallible aspects of experience emphasized by Montaigne and the scientific experimental aspects of experience stressed by Bacon. They criticize the tendency of "empiricists" to substitute rarified abstractions for the dynamic pluralistic "muchness" of concrete experience. At the same time, they take seriously the active, intervening, experimental character of experience. (Dewey favored the term "experimentalism" as a description of his philosophical position.) Furthermore, the pragmatists appreciate the historical shaping of experience as well as its political dimension. This is evident in the way in which Dewey, for example, sought to democratize experience.

When we turn to Jay's discussion of Benjamin and Adorno, we seem to be in an entirely different world. They were preoccupied with the "crisis of experience": the loss of "real" experience in the modern world. Jay's discussion of Benjamin is a tour de force. With deftness, subtlety, and nuance, he succinctly follows the twists and turns of Benjamin's "obsession" with experience from his earliest writings through the posthumous *Arcades Project*. But one may seriously question Jay's claim that Benjamin and Adorno elaborate an "all-encompassing notion of experience." Despite the fact that Benjamin kept returning, extending, and critiquing Kant (just as Adorno did with Hegel), there is scarcely any serious concern with integrating the cognitive scientific dimensions of experience into their understanding of the concept. Indeed, it was the presumably promiscuous development of science and technology that brought about the "crisis of experience."

In his final song cycle, "The Poststructuralist Reconstitution of Experience," Jay does a splendid job of showing that these thinkers do *not* abandon experience in favor of the linguistic turn. Rather they seek to *reconstruct* the concept of experience without a subject. Bataille speaks of "inner experience," which we might normally construe as "subjective" experience. But paradoxically, it means something radically different: "willingness to live life as a radical experiment, involving the body as well as the mind, risking danger in the quest for a certain version of redemption" (370). Bataille is obsessed with extremes: suffering, pain, ecstasy, rapture, and self-immolation. Foucault takes up Bataille's theme of transgression. But there are also unresolved tensions between Foucault's flirtation with "limit-experiences" and writing the "history of truth." Foucault succinctly characterizes his complex project in a late interview:

I have taken pains to understand how man had reduced some of his limit-experiences to objects of knowledge (*connaissance*): madness, death, and crime. Here, if you like, the themes of George Bataille may be recognized,

reconsidered from the point of view (*optique*) of a collective history, that of the West and its knowledge (*savoir*). The relationship between limit-experiences and the history of truth: I am more or less imprisoned or wrapped up in this tangle of problems. (399)

Jay shows just how central this concept of "experience without a subject" is for these French thinkers. But his claim that they are engaged in the project of overcoming the earlier modalization of experience and are seeking a new holistic conception is unpersuasive. They emphasized very selective and idiosyncratic aspects of experience. I doubt whether Montaigne would even have recognized what Bataille and Foucault mean by the term. Their emphasis on extremes, limits, and transgression is antithetical to the spirit of his balanced and judicious understanding of the contingency of experience.

I do not know of any other study that seeks to be as comprehensive and as exhaustive as this one. Jay has a rare ability to treat the most varied ideas with delicacy and hermeneutical generosity. It is a stunning achievement. And yet, it is not completely satisfying, in part because of its ambition. Jay covers too much ground. For all its alleged comprehensiveness, one comes away with a sense of incompleteness. Many aspects and ways of thinking of experience are simply not treated here. With few exceptions, Jay does not deal with the way in which poets, novelists, and artists think about it. Major figures such as Wittgenstein and Husserl, who have changed the way we think about it, tend to be marginalized. It is perplexing too why Freud -- and more generally psychoanalysis, which has transformed our understanding of experience -- is never thematized. There are limits to what can be covered in a single book. But the main problem is that Jay's *principle of selection* -- what does and what does not get discussed -- is never entirely clear. Paradoxically, there is too little history here. In his introduction, Jay tells us that because his "cast of characters" is so large he cannot make a sustained attempt to contextualize the origin and development of their ideas. But he pays a heavy price for this limitation. We do not have much sense of what historical factors influenced these thinkers. Intellectual historians are confronted with twin dangers. There is a danger of reductionism, of treating ideas in an oversimplified and distorted manner and of accounting for them by appeal to historical variables in a crude manner. This is not a danger that even tempts Jay. But there is the opposing danger of abstracting ideas from the thickness of history -- social, political and cultural. Jay is aware of this danger, but by covering so much ground he has to sacrifice detailed historical contextualization for conceptual analysis.

I also think that questions may be raised about Jay's developmental tripartite structure: Montaigne's holism; the modalization and fragmentation of experience; the development of a more robust holism that overcomes the modalization of experience. As Jay himself indicates, early in the nineteenth century, Hegel had a deep sense of the fragmentation of experience, and he

sought -- in a more ambitious way than any previous thinker did -- to develop an all-encompassing robust conception of *Erfahrung*. We find the yearning for holism concurrent with the modalization of experience. And this continues right up to the present.

At the beginning of his book Jay declares: "'Experience,' of all the words in the philosophic vocabulary is the most difficult to manage;" warns Michael Oakeshott . . . " (9). Jay discovers just how difficult it is to manage "experience." A skeptical reader might come away with the feeling that "experience" is not just difficult to manage, but is a signifier that can take on the most diverse conflicting and contradictory meanings. Perhaps it would be best if we could drop the term altogether. But there is another moral that can be drawn from Jay's exciting and perilous journey, the one that I think Jay wants us to draw (and which I share). Despite the protean quality of "experience," it has a power, a passionate intensity and a lure that are irresistible. Like the return of the repressed, experience has the dynamic power of returning in ever-new guises. We cannot escape from appealing to experience (in one of its multiple and changing shapes) in our irrepressible attempts to make sense of our being-in-the-world.