

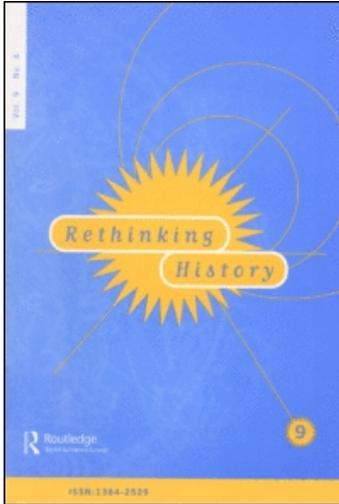
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## Frank Ankersmit: From narrative to experience

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This paper analyzes key issues in the work of Frank Ankersmit: narrative, representation and sublime historical experience. It argues that his recent turn to experience marks a shift from an interest in narrative and the textual dimension of the past to an examination of the notion of an experience about the past. It suggests that although Ankersmit is usually associated with postmodernist avanguardia in historical theory (narrativism, constructivism), as can be seen in his theory of historical representation, his understanding of the concept of historical experience and the sublime can be seen as regression. Thus, although Ankersmit had pushed historical theory beyond the linguistic turn, his most recent work can be understood as a return to a traditional Romantic view of immediate experience combined with an Enlightenment analysis of it.

**Keywords:** Frank Ankersmit; narrative; historical representation; historical experience; sublime; new humanities

Frank Ankersmit enjoys wide recognition in the English-speaking world. His book *Narrative logic* (1983) is considered a fundamental work of narrativism, alongside Arthur C. Danto's *Analytical philosophy of history* (1965) and Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973). By shifting the focus of theoretical inquiry from narrative to the experience of the past, he has taken historical theory beyond the linguistic turn, but one might ask: where is this move taking us?

Ankersmit's writings on the narrativist philosophy of history, which will be discussed in this paper, focus on three main issues: (1) narration, narrative logic, and narrative substance; (2) representation and historical representation; and (3) historical experience.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will try to describe how his turn to experience shifts from interest in narrative and textual dimension of the past to experience *about* the past. I will argue that even if Ankersmit is usually associated with postmodernist *avant gardism* in

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historical theory (narrativism, constructivism) that is visible especially in his theory of historical representation, his understanding of a concept of historical experience and the sublime marks a step back. His most recent position might be described as *avant-poste*. Thus, even if I claim that Ankersmit pushes historical theory beyond the linguistic turn, this move could be understood as a ‘return of a tradition’ to a Romantic view of an immediate experience and Enlightenment instruments of analysing it.

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The year 1960 saw the publication of the first issue of *History and Theory*. Devoted mainly to the analytical philosophy of history, its articles on historical laws, causality, and explanation tracked and monitored the ongoing attempts to turn history into a scientific discipline reducible to the Popper–Hempel model. Earlier, similar criticism was voiced by William H. Dray, who in his *Laws and explanation in history* (1957) argued that the covering-law model offered only one among many possible modes of explanation. In 1962 and 1963, *History and Theory* featured essays by Arthur C. Danto and W.B. Gallie, who emphasized the cognitive value of narration, claiming that ‘the question of historical narrative is prior to all other questions with which critical philosophers of history have struggled’ (Gallie 1963, 149; Danto 1962; Vann 1995; Mink 1979). With those publications the philosophy of history began to evolve toward narrativism as its focus shifted from the logical and conceptual problems of explaining events to the logical and conceptual problems of understanding narration. A turning point in this evolution was Danto’s *Analytical philosophy of history* (1965). Although he did not reject the covering-law model, Danto distinguished between explanation based on that model and historical understanding expressed in narration. Historical understanding, he argued, differs from scientific explanation because historical understanding assumes the form of narration. An important aspect of Danto’s theory was his observation that events are known to us only insofar as they are described and narrativized, and that the same event can be correctly described in more than one way. Thus, a given event can become the object of a covering-law explanation and at the same time can be an element of narration and yield another kind of explanation.

The term ‘narrativism’ was first used by William Dray in his 1971 essay ‘On the nature and role of narrative in historiography’. Dray coined this term to refer to those philosophers of history who stressed the importance of narration in historical writing: Morton White, Gallie, and Danto (Dray 1971). Hayden White was included in the narrativists later but his approach to narration was different. He was concerned neither with the explanatory character of narration nor with debates between advocates of the covering-law model and narrativists, who disagreed about the status of historical explanation.

Rather, through his reading of Roland Barthes, Kenneth Burke, Northrop Frye, and Roman Jakobson, Hayden White became interested in the theory of narration which provided him with ideas and instruments for the analysis of the rhetorical aspect of narration, and especially historical narration. Following Barthes, White understood narration as a way of making sense of life and the world, and this concept was later taken up by Ankersmit.

After White, Ankersmit is the main representative of the narrativist philosophy of history, otherwise known as narrativism, especially of its late phase.<sup>2</sup> Ankersmit distinguishes between two opposing trends in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of history: critical or epistemological and narrativist. Critical philosophy of history is concerned with historical research, while narrativist philosophy of history studies historical writing. According to Ankersmit, narrativist philosophy of history is a philosophy of historical writing which proposes an aesthetic approach to historiography. In contrast to the critical philosophy of history, which is interested in true propositions and their relation to reality, narrativist philosophy of history analyzes the historical text as a whole and is interested in relationships between texts (representations of the past). Critical philosophy of history deals with description and explanation; narrativist philosophy of history focuses on interpretation (Ankersmit 1994, 6; 1992, 104–5; 1996).

In the 1970s, with Louis O. Mink and Hayden White, narrativism entered another phase as it borrowed the theoretical apparatus of structuralism, formalism, and textualism to focus on the rhetorical aspect of historical writing. The next phase, marked by the publication of Ankersmit's works in the 1980s, emphasized historical representation. Since the mid-1990s the focus of historical theory has shifted from historical representation to the problems of memory (Dominick LaCapra) and historical experience (Ankersmit), a shift which marks the decline of narrativism as the dominant trend in historical theory.

Ankersmit's aestheticism differentiates his work from that of White. This difference defines the two tendencies in narrativism in the late 1980s and 1990s. While White represents a rhetorical approach, stressing the correspondences between historiography and literary writing, Ankersmit assumes an aesthetic perspective, comparing historical representation to artistic representation. Furthermore, Ankersmit argues for the priority of aesthetics over ethics. He makes it clear, however, that this approach is only justified in the circumstances of free historical debate and freedom of speech: '[T]his moral requirement is the *conditio sine qua non* of all that I have argued' (Ankersmit 2001, 103).

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*Narrative logic* was indebted to the early phase of narrativism in its focus on the logical structure of narration. However, the theory of narrative

substances he formulated in *Narrative logic* drew Ankersmit to devote more attention to representation of the past, which in turn inspired his signature aesthetic approach to historical writing. *Narrative logic* complemented White's already classic *Metahistory*, providing mature narrativism with a metalogical apparatus.<sup>3</sup>

According to Ankersmit, historical theorists fall into two categories: those who treat the historical text as a whole and those who believe that the truth of the historical text resides in the truth of its individual propositions taken distributively. The former, who follow Hayden White, rely on literary theory for analytical instruments, while the latter turn to contemporary linguistic philosophy and science. Ankersmit himself can be situated in-between the two groups: on the one hand, he is interested in the text as a whole; on the other, he uses the apparatus of linguistic philosophy and science. This is perhaps the reason why his approach is not widely accepted by either of the two groups of theorists – some share his goals but criticize his analytical instruments; others share the instruments but reject the goals.

Ankersmit's in-betweenness was also one of the reasons why *Narrative logic* failed to bring him wide reception or influence the development of historical theory in any significant way.<sup>4</sup> C. Behan McCullagh's unfavourable review in *History and Theory* also had its share in this failure (McCullagh 1984). Even Hayden White's laudatory review in the *American Historical Review* did not help, although White went so far as to compare the importance of Ankersmit's study with that of the English translation of volume one of Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et récit*, which was published in the same year (White 1984). Historians ignored *Narrative logic*, discouraged by Ankersmit's abstract arguments about narration and a philosophical language that was alien to most historians. However, Ankersmit was not concerned with the historians' opinion; it was philosophers whose attention he wanted to attract. Because of his own philosophical education, Ankersmit wishes philosophers were interested in historical theory and historiography. In one of his texts he regretfully agrees with Danto's opinion that contemporary historians treat historical theory in the same way that musicologists treat military music – as a noisy and unsophisticated genre practiced by ungifted amateurs, whose company one should avoid if one wants to be treated seriously by one's colleagues. More than any other contemporary theorist of history, Ankersmit draws upon the work of philosophers and tries to draw their attention to historiography. He believes R.G. Collingwood's prophetic statement that historical writing will eventually become one of philosophy's main interests.<sup>5</sup> He also believes that historical experience can provide a common ground on which historians, historical theorists, and philosophers can debate issues and that historical writing both demonstrates the turn from language to experience that has occurred in history and historical theory and help to restore to philosophy the category of experience.

### Historical representation

Historical discourse is a realistic discourse, Ankersmit argues. The historian wants to represent a fragment of the past in a realistic fashion, but in order to be realistic, a representation must not only contain a set of propositions that have a truth value but also convey a certain notion about the nature of past reality.<sup>6</sup> Ankersmit often says that historical narratives are representations of the past which create meanings. They propose to look at the past from a certain vantage point and to organize our knowledge about the past in a certain way. Thus, the truth criterion proves insufficient in debates between historians who represent different schools of thought. What is important is which representation of the past is considered realistic and which is not (Ankersmit 1992, 106). When we move from the level of an individual true proposition to the level of sets of propositions – representations – we also move from the level of epistemology to that of representation (aesthetics). This turn is possible because historical narration contains logical/linguistic units which embody a synthetic view of a fragment of the past, units which Ankersmit calls narrative substances. Individual true propositions are properties of the narrative substance proposed in a given representation. A true proposition performs a twofold function in a narrative: first, it declares a certain state of affairs; second, it forms part of the definition of a given representation of the past. Those two functions are inseparable. Thus, Ankersmit advocates a three-level model of the relation between past reality and the text. Its constituents are: (1) the past in itself (ontology), (2) the level of description (epistemology), (3) the level of representation (aesthetics) (Ankersmit 2001, 29–74).

Ankersmit argues that historical research generates certain problems for epistemologists, whereas historical writing lies beyond the scope of epistemology. His notion of narrative substances/historical representations<sup>7</sup> precludes epistemological questions, which, he claims, become aesthetic questions. Accordingly, Ankersmit treats representation as a necessary supplement of epistemology. Epistemology, which examines the relations between predicate and referent, can answer the question of how language relates to the world, but is unable to deal with complex texts, such as novels or historical writing. As Ankersmit contends, 'the statement is epistemological, the text is representational; and whoever tries to understand the text with the means of epistemology is condemned to impotence' (Ankersmit 2003, 424).

In *Narrative logic* Ankersmit attempts to demonstrate that narrative substances apply to the past, but do not refer to it (although individual statements included in narration do contain such reference) (Ankersmit 1994, 36). This means that narrative substances (such as, for example, the Cold War) can be said to apply to a body of phenomena but do not refer to a specific body of phenomena. Thus, for example, the Cold War as such does not exist but only as narrative substances. Ankersmit always stresses

the difference between description and representation: in description we can distinguish between the subject and the predicate, while in narrative substances/representation it is impossible. For example, if we consider the representation of Enlightenment despotism, we cannot separate those fragments of the text which only refer to Enlightenment despotism from those which ascribe certain properties to the representation.

Drawing upon Ernst Gombrich's theories and Arthur C. Danto's studies of art, Ankersmit always emphasizes the non-referential character of narrative substances/historical representations, which serve as substitutes of past reality. To illustrate this problem, which is the essence of representation, Ankersmit compares historical writing to figurative painting, and the work of the historian to that of a portrait painter.<sup>8</sup> This analogy, Ankersmit argues, is more insightful than comparing the historian to a novelist. Ankersmit's parallel between historical writing and painting enables him to borrow Gombrich's 'substitutive theory of representation'. Ankersmit claims the priority of representation over the represented. Actually, we only know the represented through representation, and hence without representation the represented would not exist. Representation tends to take the place of the represented. Such concepts as the Renaissance or the Cold War, which in fact are nothing but heuristic instruments, become substitutes for the historical reality they attempt to replace. As soon as they achieve the status of generally accepted (historical) entities defining a given fragment of the past, they become part of the past. In this sense, as an element of already existing knowledge, representations precede our knowledge of events as expressed in true propositions. Ankersmit argues that we should not ask whether those substitutes resemble what they represent (this question is pointless as narrative units do not refer to reality but only apply to it), but whether they can successfully replace what they represent (Ankersmit 1988).

However, Ankersmit does not advocate radical constructivism. He explains his position in the following way:

[T]here exists in representation a correspondence between the represented and its representation that does not have its counterpart or equivalent in description. Description does not know these constraints of coherence and consistency that inevitably enter the scene as soon as we move from simple description to the complexities of representation. There is, thus, something peculiarly 'idealistic' about representation, in the sense that how we decide to conceptualize reality on the level of representation (of reality) determines what we will find on the level of the represented (i.e. on that of reality itself). This should *not* be taken, however, to mean that thought or representation actually 'makes' or 'creates' reality – as, admittedly, some extremist deconstructivists or narrativists are in the habit of saying – but only that a decision with regard to the former level will determine what we shall find on the second level.

Nevertheless, the suggestion of idealism is reinforced by the fact that reality (or the represented) will remain a chaos as long as no such decision has been

made and no level of representation has been singled out for ordering this chaos. In this sense, and *only* in this sense can the pseudo-idealist claim be defended that representation determines the represented. (Ankersmit 2001, 44–5)

Is it at all possible to break this circle of representations and the traditions governing them? Ankersmit believes it is: historians sometimes manage to break out of ‘the prison of representation’ through immediate and authentic experience, which discloses the past as it really was.

### Historical experience

Ankersmit argues that the linguistic philosophy of history was successful in its examination of the rhetorical dimension of historical writing and the narrative construction of the past. However, it overestimated textuality and produced a sense of separation from the actual past. It was to be expected that the constructivist and narrativist phases would be followed by some form of empiricism (or neopositivism). It is also worth remembering that Ankersmit was always interested in the relationship between language and the world without being interested in epistemology. Thus, his turn to the idea of ‘sublime’ historical experience, in the early 1990s, constituted a move beyond epistemology and an empiricist approach to experience.<sup>9</sup>

According to Ankersmit, not only historical theory and historiography, but also philosophy attempt to recover the category of experience. His own interest in the problem of experience resulted from several tendencies in historiography, historical theory, and philosophy. Experience becomes an important term in the history of mentality, history of everyday life, and microhistory (Chartier 1988; Hunt 1989; Rab and Rotberg 1982; Burke 1991). Ankersmit often says that the history proposed by those approaches is in fact a history of experience. Those tendencies in historical writing directed our attention away from structures, processes, and syntheses toward how ordinary people in the past experienced the world and how their experience was different from ours. In addition, those approaches address the question of whether the past can be experienced and, if so, whether it is possible without the mediation of culture, tradition, or language. Thus, while traditional historiography celebrates the triumph of language over the world, microhistories enable us to ‘experience’ the past as they describe life in, for example, thirteenth-century Montaillou. Those questions grew in importance with the revived interest in memory observable since the mid-1980s, and the concomitant rediscovery of psychoanalysis for historical theory, which now centered on the notions of trauma, mourning, and melancholia (Klein 2000). For Ankersmit, memory brought together historical theory and historiography in the reflection on experience.

The changes in historical theory and historiography coincided with two more general tendencies in contemporary philosophy. One is the reformulation of the problems addressed by linguistic philosophy in terms of the philosophy of consciousness. This 'turn from language to consciousness' is actually, in Ankersmit's view, a turn to experience.

In opposition to language, consciousness and its representations of the world could not exist without experience. The content of consciousness and its representations of the world are given to us in and by experience. Without experience, there is no consciousness. So, if we move from language to consciousness, the issue of experience becomes an ineluctable item on the philosopher's agenda. (Ankersmit 2005, 6)

The other tendency is philosophy's keen interest in aesthetics. Ankersmit is right to observe that art is replacing science as inspiration for philosophy, and that philosophers have again begun to address the questions of how experience is expressed in a work of art and how we as audience experience art.

For Ankersmit, one of the key problems of contemporary historical theory is the way we approach the past. In order to address this problem, we need to study the history of historical experience. A major difficulty, however, is the fact that experience is expressed in language; hence,

it will be the difficult but challenging future task of the historical theorist to liberate the history of historical experience from the heavy and oppressive weight of (the historian's) language and to unearth experience from the thick sedimentary strata of language covering it. (Ankersmit 2005, 14)

Historical experience expresses our attitude toward the past. The reality of this experience is constituted in the space of a double movement of, first, losing the past (the recognition that the present does not fully contain past and present things) and, second, regaining it (the desire to cross the boundary between the present and the past). The intersection of opposite axes running from the present to the past and from the past to the present creates intense feelings of pain and pleasure which become a source of the sublime (Ankersmit 2005, 9).

Explaining his concept of historical experience, Ankersmit often refers to the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder, Lodewijk Van Deijssel, and Johan Huizinga. Those thinkers defined experience as a sort of 'disclosure' which in a direct and authentic way reveals the past 'as it really was'. Historical experience is decontextualized and breaches the continuum of other experiences. In addition, Van Deijssel and Huizinga stress the fact that historical experience is related to the immediacy of touch rather than the possessiveness of sight with the domesticating power of the eye, and that historical experience can be produced by an ordinary object, such as an old print. Although Ankersmit's theory of historical experience incorporates

many elements of this approach – such as the idea of a momentary, unique, unpredictable experience which cannot be adequately expressed in language and which is related to the sense of touch – Ankersmit points out that it is not his intention to continue or further develop the Van Deijssel–Huizinga approach.

Ankersmit realizes that on the level of traditional epistemology his notion of historical experience as direct contact with reality must be perceived as heretical. After all, he not only rejects earlier notions of experience proposed by Dilthey, Collingwood, Oakeshott, or Gadamer, but wholly abandons epistemology for the sake of aesthetics, following John Dewey's *Art as experience*. Historical experience becomes for Ankersmit a sort of aesthetic experience – which does not mean, however, that it must be produced by a work of art. Historical experience is possible when there is harmony between the subject and the object of experience and with the assumption that it is a complex experience, which enables resistance to the mediation of tradition and language. Ankersmit adds that (sublime) historical experience is unrelated to a desire for knowledge and therefore is not epistemological but ontological in nature: it changes us. The problem of how to express this experience in language arises later and belongs to a different level than the experience itself. Besides, while the experience is conditioned by the context, the content of the experience may be independent of the context.

An important element of Ankersmit's approach is his separation of truth and experience. He claims that there is no point in asking about the truthfulness of historical experience since the question of truth concerns the way of describing experience and deciding whether this description is consistent with the reality described. Moreover, Ankersmit assumes an anticognitive approach to historical experience, which does not result in knowledge about the past but can make us look at the past in a particular manner. The essence of sublime historical experience is that it is an experience without a subject: individuality disappears as we become a feeling or an experience. Historical experience involves the difficult act of dissociation, that is, separation from what we believe to be our own self. 'We die a partial death at such moments since all that we are is then reduced to just this feeling or experience' (Ankersmit 2005, 228). Ankersmit stresses dissociation as one of the most important aspects of his theory of experience. The notion of 'experience without the subject of experience' becomes clearer when we realize that Ankersmit applies it mostly to the identity of periods or civilizations, which, unlike human beings, are not autonomous individuals but, in Ankersmit's view, are themselves experiences.

This leads us to another major aspect of Ankersmit's theory of historical experience. He argues that paradigmatic historical experiences are trauma and the sublime. T]rauma is the psychological counterpart of the sublime, whereas the sublime is the epistemological counterpart of trauma

(Ankersmit 2003, 430). Those experiences are 'authentic' and enable us to touch the world as it is. They cannot be explained in terms of traditional epistemology since they precede and transcend the experiences that fall within the scope of epistemology. Ankersmit points out that

if we wish to study trauma and the sublime in history we should focus on periods in the history of the West of cataclysmic change and in which the awareness of the loss of the past has taken on the characteristics of the sublime. (Ankersmit 2003, 429)

It must be noted, however, that Ankersmit's conception of trauma is radically different from that proposed by Dominick LaCapra (LaCapra 1989, 2001, 2004). Ankersmit is not interested in the individual or collective experience of trauma (such as the Holocaust) but in the civilization which is the subject of trauma. He asks, 'how did western civilization *as such* deal with the most serious crises?' This question is interesting in that every catastrophe creates a new paradigm of historical writing; for example, the trauma of the French Revolution and Napoleon's wars led to the emergence of historicism, which, according to Ankersmit, is still the predominant model of historical writing.<sup>10</sup>

Ankersmit's concept of historical experience may seem naive. However, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty, in whose footsteps he follows, claim that sometimes such 'infantilization' of philosophy is necessary to change the focus of the debate (Putnam 1994; Rorty 1999, 34, 221). It is this '*naïveté*' of the question of experience that appeals to Ankersmit.<sup>11</sup> His approach may also seem mystical, not in the religious sense, but in a way reminiscent of Bataille's 'inner experience'. In *Sublime historical experience* (2005) Ankersmit explains that he associates the concept of sublime experience with the concept of myth understood as suprahistorical and quasi-natural. Ankersmit is more and more interested in seeing the world in terms of natural law as understood by Spinoza rather than Rousseau. It is a romantic notion, aimed against rational methods of argumentation. Ankersmit openly claims this romantic legacy, as in the following passage:

Sublimity will, by its very nature, teach us no truths about the past, for from the perspective of cognitive truth this kind of encounter with the past simply does not and cannot exist. Sublime experience lives in a universe different from that of truth – and of falsity, as I would like to insist . . . This may, again, be interpreted as a plea in favour of a Romanticist conception of our relationship to the past – a conception seeing in moods, feelings, and the experience of the past the highest stage of historical consciousness. This is, finally, where and why it surpasses the Enlightened rationalism of contemporary 'Theory,' whose arid abstractions have so much dominated historical thought in the last decades; this is where it can, at least, be seen as a correction of all the hermeneuticist, (post-)structuralist, tropological or narrativist theories of history and in terms of which we used to conceive of the past and of what it must mean to us. It is open, again, to the profound and fascinating mysteries

of the past and considers it to be historical theory's main task to rekindle our sensitivity to these mysteries, instead of surrendering to intellectualist fashions from which the reality of the past, its hopes, its catastrophes, its joys and miseries, have so completely been banned. (Ankersmit 2005, 231–2)

Let us quote one more fragment:

[*Sublime historical experience*] can therefore be seen as an uncompromising attack on all that came to be known over the last twenty to thirty years by the name of 'theory.' The 'rationalism' that 'theory' took over from the transcendentalist philosophy of language will be rejected here in the name of the notion of *experience*. The intellectual bureaucracy of 'theory' will in this book be replaced by the 'Romanticism' of an approach to the past involving all of the historian's personality and not just (or even more primarily) the formation of his or her cognitive faculties. More specifically, this book is a rehabilitation of the romanticist's world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past . . . I shall be the first to admit that, just like it was two centuries ago, one can only get to Romanticism after first having passed through rationalism and 'theory.' In this way the book will remain tributary to 'theory' and the linguistic rationalism that it criticizes and rejects. I need only point out, in this context, that it will be a *literary* category – this is, that of the sublime – that dominates the argument in this book and in terms of which this transition from rationalism to Romanticism will be performed. (Ankersmit 2005, 10–11)

As we see from the above fragments, it is clear that Ankersmit seeks an alternative to the twentieth-century philosophical view of the relation between language and reality and wants restore the immediacy and authenticity of experience, opposing rationalist philosophy of language. 'One really has to opt either for language or for experience,' Ankersmit said in 1992.

I am convinced that we are entering a new world with this recent interest in experience and consciousness . . . Experience, then, may very well prove to be the notion that will enable us to overcome this 'crisis of representation' . . . History might very well prove to be the discipline that best exemplifies what is at stake in the transition from language to experience . . . [W]hat I am dreaming of is a historical theory that will concentrate on the notion of historical experience to write a new chapter not only in the book of the history of historical theory, but also in that of the history of philosophy. (Domanska 1998, 94)

### **Ankersmit's *avant-poste***

Ankersmit has written a book on historical experience that is at variance with the current tendencies in historical theory. We cannot predict whether it will succeed in drawing the attention of historical theorists to the notion of experience or philosophers to the works of historians. It must be noted, however, that Ankersmit's new book, like his other writings, ignores the

theory of experience as formulated by such trends as 'history from below', women's history, as well as the anthropology of experience or archaeological theory.<sup>12</sup> Ankersmit's refusal to engage with those movements significantly diminishes his readership and the potential impact of his theory.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, as I pointed out above, Ankersmit is making a philosophical rather than a historiographical argument and instead of being concerned with historians' opinions, he wishes to attract philosophers' attention.<sup>14</sup>

In Ankersmit's theory of history philosophy provides the methodology, and historiography the empirical material. Notwithstanding his declarations that historiography best illustrates the problem of historical experience and despite his earlier work on historical narrative and representation, Ankersmit's approach is abstract and detached from the fabric of historical writing. As McCullagh aptly remarked, Ankersmit's studies, from *Narrative logic* to his most recent publications, fail to provide specific analyses of historical works, which makes his theory inadequate to the material it concerns. Indeed, apart from analysing works of classic authors in the nineteenth-century historiography (Gibbon, Tocqueville) (Ankersmit 1996) Ankersmit does not discuss contemporary historical studies, and thus effectively fails to substantiate his theory of narrative substances, representation, and experience. Unlike White, who introduced rhetorical analysis of historical texts into historical theory and who in his *Metahistory* uses historiography as material for his theory of tropes, Ankersmit treats historical writing primarily as illustrative material for his philosophical analyses. This approach, with its preference for logical argumentation, clarity of thought, and a way of constructing the argument typical of analytical philosophy (and language philosophy), reveals Ankersmit's philosophical background.<sup>15</sup> (By contrast, White's background is in medieval studies and his methodology is borrowed from formalist and structuralist literary theory.) Some readers may also object to Ankersmit's selective and ahistorical approach to historical writing. His works mention the classic works of historiography by Gibbon, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Michelet, or Huizinga, as well as microhistory as practiced by Ginzburg or Davis, but all those references often serve as nothing but code words. For example, in his discussion of historical experience Ankersmit not only ignores those trends in historiography which emerged in the 1990s, when he was formulating his theory of experience, but also fails to acknowledge those works which first drew historians' attention to the category of experience, such as 'history from below' with E.P. Thompson's classic *The making of the English working class* (1963) and the journal *History Workshop*, focusing on the experience of real life.<sup>16</sup> Further, Ankersmit does not acknowledge the long tradition of women's history, which concentrates on the everyday experience of women, or the history of gender.

In *Sublime historical experience* he never mentions Joan W. Scott's classic and influential 1991 article 'The evidence of experience'. In this

widely debated essay the feminist scholar expresses an ambivalent attitude toward experience:

*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 to redefine its meaning. (Scott 1991, 797)

Scott's approach is typical of poststructuralist fundamentalism. She points out that experience as a category is always a construct containing ideological traces of the context from which it emerges. Accordingly, scholars who stress the role of experience in historical research are as naive as those who believe in the fetish of fact. Neither experience nor fact constitutes a firm foundation for creating objective knowledge and discovering the truth about the past (Jay 2005, 250). Thus, instead of studying experience itself – as did, e.g. Thompson in his *The making of the English working class* – Scott advocates studying the processes which situate the subject and produce its experiences through a variety of discursive strategies. 'It is not individuals who have experience,' Scott argues, 'but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott 1991, 779; Scott 1992). Scott sees experience as a function of a number of discourses. Of course, her approach is politically motivated, a fact she treats as a manifestation of her professionalism rather than its opposite (Scott 1989, 690). In Scott's view one aspect of the historian's professionalism is her/his specific, clearly defined political stance.

While Scott cautions against the notion of experience because it can essentialize both the experiencing subject and experience itself, Frank Ankersmit addresses experience within the aesthetic framework of the sublime. His view of experience is radically opposed to that of Scott.<sup>17</sup> Adopting the concept of the sublime based on the classic theories of Burke and Kant, Ankersmit seems to invite the kind of criticism that is generally aimed at the project of modernity.

I doubt whether Ankersmit's understanding of the term 'sublime' – which is his key concept – as conceived in the Burkean or Kantian sense, is adequate to the situation and needs of the theory and history of historiography in the new century. I might find useful a theory of the sublime, the instruments for its analysis, and understanding of its aesthetics insofar as it would not put historical reflection back within the framework of the enlightenment ideology, which, after all, has long been subjected to criticism by historians. I therefore believe that a discussion of the historical sublime should take into account the critical views of it, which I would like to recapitulate briefly below.

In 1981, shortly after the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's well-known essay 'The sublime and the avant-garde', Jean-Luc Nancy declared

that *'le sublime est la mode'*. Lyotard's reinterpretation of the sublime had given rise to widespread criticism of this category. It was argued by some that the aesthetics of the sublime is actually the aesthetics of power based upon and supportive of binary oppositions between the mind and the body, humans and non-humans, men and women, the self and the other, or the colonizer and the colonized under imperialism. Critics of logocentrism perceived the sublime as a manifestation of the 'pride of reason'; ecologists warned against the return to the romantic conception of the wilderness rooted in the aesthetics of the sublime; Marxist critics considered the sublime an element in the ideology of the bourgeois subject; anthropologists pointed to the fact that it justified the power of the civilized 'I' over the 'savage' other; finally, feminist critics viewed it as another expression of a masculinist will to power. Thus, we actually have to do with an 'ideology of the sublime', which – as the above-mentioned groups of critics claim – serves as an effective instrument for manipulating interpretations for political purposes.

Furthermore, whereas the attempts to reconceptualize the aesthetics of the sublime are part of the general critique of the project of modernity, Ankersmit seems to disregard this fact, referring to the traditional conceptions of the sublime. Arguably, however, such conceptions are becoming inadequate for the analyses conducted by some contemporary historiography, which urges experiments with various forms of representation, engages in a kind of flirtation with postmodernism, and draws inspiration from it (Munslow and Rosenstone 2004).

The above remarks are related to the issues of anthropocentrism and logocentrism – the key points of the critique of modern thinking. The sublime concerns an exclusively human world. Both Burke and Kant define the sublime as the sensations, emotions, 'a mental movement', or emotional shock to the human being experiences when faced, e.g. with some awesome or terrifying natural phenomenon. Kant stresses the fact that 'sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object of nature' and is the sensation of the intellect alone (Kant 1991, 501 and 496). Such a conception of the sublime objectivizes nature, relegating it to the role of a source of emotions. This fact was highlighted by Lyotard, who said that nature as understood by Kant ceases to speak to us in an obscure code and is used or even abused by the intellect (Lyotard 1991, 137; Kant 1991, 503). Although the sublime is evoked by the apprehension of nature's might which forces the individual to recognize his/her physical weakness, it enables at the same time a sense of one's intellectual superiority. Thus, nature is sublime insofar as it makes possible recognizing the unlimited powers of the mind, including its power over nature (Kant 1991, 503).

The conception of the sublime as a value imposes upon us a subject-object view of the world, in which the rational and sentient human subject can pride itself on the possession of his/her sensitive mind. The sublime reveals the 'pride of reason'. It presupposes reflective judgment and is

concerned only with the ideas of reason; it is the violence done by reason to the senses and the instrument of this violence (Kant 1991, 495, 496, 505). Thus, the sublime is the feeling evoked in humans by the pride resulting from the possession of an 'organ' with which they are able to rule the world. This way of thinking is characteristic of the modern view of the world, marked – as I have noted above – by anthropocentrism, logocentrism, and thinking in terms of binary oppositions, where positive values are attributed to reason and reflection, while negative ones ascribed to the body and senses.

However, the tendencies to idealize nature manifest in the discourse of ecology and eco-philosophy are subject to criticism as well. The concept of wild nature (the wildness being a cultural construct) the experience of which evokes the feeling of the sublime repeats the dichotomy between nature and humanity, and reinforces the disparity between the non-human world and that of the humans (Bordo 1992; Cronon 1996; Hitt 1999).

Another aspect of the critique of the sublime concerns its androcentric (or phallogentric) character, evident both in Burke and in Kant. Burke describes the sublime and the beautiful by means of the traditional attributes of masculinity and femininity, saying that the sublime is solid, massive, violent, active, and founded on pain, whereas the beautiful is small, smooth, light and delicate, passive, and founded on pleasure (Burke 1968, 124).

Similarly, Kant's *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* contains an exposition of psychological and biological differences between men and women, which the philosopher believes to have been determined by nature. The sublime is ascribed to man, the beautiful to woman. This basic division is followed by a long series of similar dichotomies: man who is connected with the sublime, is characterized by movement, composure, solemnity, reason, courage, integrity, reliability, noble-mindedness, helpfulness, genuine virtue, old age, friendship, tragedy, melancholy, dark hair, dark eyes. By contrast woman who equals the beautiful, is characterized by diversity, mutability, playfulness, coquetry, cunning, polite flattery, adopted virtue, young age, sexual love, comedy, sanguine temperament, blond hair, blue eyes (Kant 1960, 76ff).

Thus, the sublime is a gender-specific concept: the feeling of the sublime described by the classics is associated with the masculine perception of the world. The reflection on the sublime and beautiful entails the fundamental division into the two sexes and makes use of their stereotypical features. This is why the concept of the sublime has become the object of feminist criticism. Timothy Gould, for example, perceives the sublime as paternal power, whereas Meg Armstrong argues that it contributes to producing not only sexual stereotypes, but racial stereotypes as well (Gould 1995; Armstrong 1996).

An investigation into the historical sublime should take into account the critique of the classic conception of aesthetics and the attempts at its

reinterpretation. Recent studies have argued that the tradition of aesthetics originated by Baumgarten and Kant proved, as Terry Eagleton put it, 'inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society' (Eagleton 1990, 3). For critics interpreting it in the Marxist vein, aesthetics has become an ideologically and historically determined collection of discourses justified and supported by the same bourgeois subject founded, among other things, upon aesthetic values, which in turn support and justify sexual and racial differences.

The above-listed points of criticism directed toward traditional understanding of aesthetics and the sublime in fact indicate a fundamental problem with Frank Ankersmit's recent turn toward experience for scholars who are interested in the new humanities. When using this term, I refer to a group of academic disciplines in the USA that include various tendencies within interdisciplinary cultural studies, postcolonial studies, different kinds of ethnic studies (Afro-American Studies, Asian Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Native American Studies), gender studies, queer studies, gay and lesbian studies, disability studies, animal studies, and thing studies.<sup>18</sup> According to the advocates of the new humanities, a theory of experience that draws upon the classic notion of the sublime not only does not take us beyond the dominant discourse about experience but also grounds us in elitist high culture, to which sublime experience belongs. Ankersmit's approach exemplifies everything Scott cautions against. Therefore the new humanists cannot be expected to think favourably of Ankersmit's *Sublime historical experience*. First, the concept of experience proposed by Ankersmit is unacceptable for the new humanities because it is marked by essentialist, elitist, phallogocentric, logocentric, and anthropocentric thinking. Second, Ankersmit does not debate the new humanist stance at all: his book makes no reference whatsoever to ethnic, postcolonial, or gender studies. Moreover, Ankersmit's arguments are always philosophically sophisticated, abstract, and detached from historical practice. Ankersmit's and Scott's approaches to experience could not be more different. What manifests itself in their studies is how the discourse on experience is entangled in 'identity politics', 'the memory industry', and 'the discourse of victims' on the one hand, and post-postmodern suspicion of constructivism and narrativism on the other.

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With Ankersmit's gradual shift of interest from historical representation to historical experience – observable in his work since the 1990s – narrativism entered its late phase. The dominance of narrativism in historical theory, which began with Danto's *The analytical philosophy of history*, culminated in White's *Metahistory*, and lasted for 30 years, seems to enter its final stage with Ankersmit's *Sublime historical experience*. One might ask, if his book

could be seen as a sign of the renewal of interest in empiricism which might be observed in today's humanities (Latour 2004; Docherty 1999; Tilley et al. 2006; Domanska 2006).

Translated by Magdalena Zapiedowska

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### Notes

1. Ankersmit's interest in those issues is manifested in his subsequent books. The first of those problems is addressed in *Narrative logic* (1983) and the opening chapters of *History and tropology* (1994). This latter book documents Ankersmit's transition from questions of narration and narrative substances (about which nonetheless he will continue to write) to the problem of historical representation, which is discussed in depth in his next book (*Historical representation*, 2001). Ankersmit's theory of historical experience is expounded in his *Sublime historical experience* (2005). Ankersmit holds academic degrees in History and Philosophy. Beginning with his Master's theses, his research interests have centered upon two areas: (1) political philosophy – his Master's thesis in History, defended in 1973, dealt with the Kantian foundations of contemporary liberalism, and (2) narrativist philosophy of history, which was the subject of his Master's thesis in Philosophy, defended in 1977. This latter study was the germ of Ankersmit's doctoral dissertation in philosophy, *Narrative logic* (Ankersmit 1983). The dissertation was published in 1983 under the same title.
2. See Ankersmit's brief history of narrativism (Ankersmit and Kellner 1995, 278–83). Cf. also Chris Lorenz's critique of White's and Ankersmit's narrativism as inverted positivism (Lorenz 1998) and Ankersmit's polemic with this view (Ankersmit 2001, 50ff).
3. For a comparison of Ankersmit's 'narrative idealism' in *Narrative logic* and David Carr's 'narrative realism' in *Time, narrative and history*, see Crowell 1998.
4. It was Ankersmit's publications in *History and Theory* in the late 1980s that won him a reputation as a leading historical theorist: 'The dilemma of contemporary philosophy of history' (1986); 'Historical representation' (1988);

- and 'Historiography and postmodernism' (1989), a debate with Perez Zagorin about Ankersmit's postmodern views on historical writing (Zagorin 1990; Ankersmit 1990).
5. Collingwood says: 'The chief business of seventeenth-century philosophy was to reckon with seventeenth-century natural science ... The chief business of twentieth-century philosophy is to reckon with twentieth-century history' (Collingwood 1939, 78–9).
  6. Ankersmit claims, however, that 'truth is, of course, a non-negotiable requirement and a *conditio sine qua non* at the level of description' (Ankersmit 2001, 294, fn46) and elsewhere writes: 'I insist most emphatically that this should under no circumstance be interpreted as an attack on truth. Truth is our only criterion when we have to decide about what to say about the past in terms of singular statements. Nothing in my argument would compel us to question this absolutely basic fact about the writing of history, and I have no ambition to dispute most of what empiricists have said about this. Where truth has its role to play, we should under all circumstances most dutifully respect its rights' (Ankersmit 2005, 239).
  7. When Ankersmit abandoned narration for representation – a shift signalled by his 'Historical Representation' and fully revealed by his *History and Tropology* – the concept of representation replaced the term 'narrative substance'.
  8. It must be noted that Ankersmit's analogy between the historian and the painter refers only to figurative, realistic painting (still life, landscape, portrait), since historical discourse is also realistic. This analogy does not apply to other styles of painting.
  9. Ankersmit says explicitly that 'it was this essentially philosophical problem of getting beyond epistemology that made me interested in the notion of experience' (Moskalewicz 2007, 253–4).
  10. For Ankersmit the link with politics has always been essential. Politics and historicism have always been his guides in his intellectual career. In Ankersmit's view historicism is the greatest achievement of historical writing. It was the only approach developed by historians themselves and not imported from other disciplines. Hence, Ankersmit says, 'all my writings has always been an exhortation to return to the historicism of Herder, Ranke, Humboldt' (Ankersmit 2003, 434; 1995a; 1995b; Iggers 1995).
  11. Ankersmit rejects the accusation of naive empiricism, arguing that only complex experience can give us access to reality. This complexity involves harmony between subject and object, which also makes possible suspending the context of experience.
  12. It also has been noted by Richard J. Bernstein, who writes: 'F. R. Ankersmit is a provocative theorist who seeks to rethink the concept of historical experience in light of poststructuralist and postmodern ideas, but he hardly seems to be a central figure in the debates about history and experience that have concerned most contemporary historians' (Bernstein 2006, 274).
  13. Ankersmit fails to recognize that as early as in the 1980s the problem of experience was addressed by anthropologists (Turner and Bruner 1986) and soon afterward by archaeologists (Shanks 1992). For a comprehensive history of scholarly interest in experience, see Martin Jay, *Songs of experience*. Jay compares Joan W. Scott's and Ankersmit's approaches to experience in the chapter 'History and experience: Dilthey, Collingwood, Scott and Ankersmit' (Jay 2005; Cf. also: Zammito 2000).
  14. Ankersmit says: 'I have no pretension to change the historical discipline. If I have any revolutionary pretensions (in spite of my rather conservative turn of

- mind), then these are for philosophy only. Indeed, there I would like to rearrange things a little' (Moskalewicz 2007, 256).
15. In addition, this way of thinking was certainly influenced by the fact that Ankersmit first went to college to study physics and mathematics, which he gave up three years later to study history instead.
  16. Raphael Samuel indicates that 'real life experiences' understood 'both as a subject for historical inquiry, and as a litmus-paper to test the abstract against the particular' often occupied the central place in *History workshop*. This special interest in 'real life experiences' originated from various influences. As he writes, it 'comes from our original constituency of mainly worker-writers, and the high claims we were making for historical work to which the writer was bringing the fruits not only of research, but also of personal life history'. Among other sources of influences Samuel mentioned were micro-sociology, social and cultural anthropology, the rise of the women's movement and dissatisfaction with the existing Marxist discussion of ideology and consciousness (Samuel 1980, 165–6).
  17. There has been no debate between Scott and Ankersmit, but their approaches to experience have been contrasted by scholars (Jay 2005; Zammito 2000).
  18. For various understanding of the term 'new humanities', see Ruthven 1992; Fuery and Mansfield 1998; Spellmeyer and Miller 2006; Domanska 2006b.

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