

Peace in the Neighbourhood

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Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

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

Now is a very good time to be a historian. Not so long ago the profession was in a fairly fractious state of collective being. Social historians and cultural historians were frequently at each other's throats; mention of Michel Foucault sent ripples of scorn around the seminar room; powerful voices rallied historians to the ramparts against postmodernists and other intruders. Much intolerance stalked the halls. Civility became frayed and occasionally collapsed. Yet these days the professional gatherings show a refreshing coexistence of outlooks and approaches. If differences persist, conversation has at least been resumed. Partly the advocates of contrary approaches have settled into their own spaces, for under the sign of an open-ended pluralism everyone claims a niche. But more fundamentally, an interest in taking the cultural turn is no longer thought to imply leaving social history behind. Above all, younger generations have been arriving unmarked and unfazed by the divisiveness of those earlier times. While their legacies sometimes linger, the culture wars in the discipline seem a thing of the past.

If we can learn anything from that history of contention it must surely be the importance of talking together. Conversing across differences need not imply the chimera of a safe but anodyne consensus, whose unity and breadth presume the suppression of necessary disagreements. Nor would it require avoidance of complex or troubling questions. Gains in the discipline are rarely recorded without severe methodological and theoretical conflicts, after all. Because vested interests, distributions of power, and disparities of standing are all involved, the advocacy of change entails forms of collective organization, adversarial pleading, and forcefulness of purpose which are ever likely to excite the passions and divide opinion. From time to time, a degree of contentiousness can hardly be avoided. But when that happens, unless generosity and forbearance can be exercised, collegiality easily suffers and common goals become obscured.

The two books under review offer a chance to reflect on this practical eclecticism of the present moment. Each is a document of the contemporary intellectual history mentioned above. Elizabeth Clark explicitly reflects on the consequences of the linguistic turn, mapping out the key departures while arguing through to her own preferred standpoint. Martin Jay's latest book offers less an explicit commentary on the debates of the present than a window onto the think-

ing of one of intellectual history's most respected practitioners, who has rarely intervened directly in the polemics surrounding the linguistic turn, but has always been alive to their importance.

Over the fullness of his career Martin Jay has provided an imposing series of thoughtful, penetrating, and exhaustive explications of big conceptual themes of European thought, adding a major new work roughly every ten years. The grand ambition of these books has become ever grander. The more bounded focus of his foundational first book, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (1973), was succeeded first by a comprehensive survey of the Western Marxist tradition in *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (1984), and then by *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993), bringing us thence to *Songs of Experience*, which displays the grandest sweep of them all, reaching back from the twentieth century to the sixteenth.¹ After *The Dialectical Imagination* these studies have shared a common approach, allowing Jay first to locate a key problematic and then trace how it unfolded through the ideas of his chosen thinkers. His books consistently map out the topography of a complicated transatlantic exchange, through which European influences migrated westwards, sometimes via exile and emigration (the Frankfurt School), sometimes by circulation of ideas (French poststructuralism since the 1970s). Both *Marxism and Totality* and *Downcast Eyes* subtly and patiently rendered these bodies of thought for a North American readership, in each case tendering critical summations just as the influence was passing its peak.²

In these terms *Songs of Experience* seems a more personal and even idiosyncratic work. In a time of skepticism about the grand scale history of ideas, when intellectual historians prefer either the more focused monograph or the essay form, the book's immense scope is already a distinguishing feature. That makes Jay's choice of particular thinkers, chapter by chapter, arranged in accordance with the primary theme to foreground those aspects of their thought as opposed to others, necessarily a bit arbitrary. His aim is to explore the full repertoire of meanings given to the concept of experience between the sixteenth century and the present, ranging across different periods and traditions of thought in order to explore the grounds for the abiding urgency which the concept always seems to pose. By this means he seeks to illuminate both the sources of controversy among the main traditions of Western thought and their recurrence to certain commonalities of purpose.

After a brief allusion to classical and medieval uses of the concept of experience, the book properly begins with a reading of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* of 1587-88. For Jay, Montaigne's thinking belonged to the effort after the Renaissance and Reformation to reconcile meaning and value on the ground of a holistic humanism fashioned from the contingency and material immediacy of a lived present, in a way that embraced the messiness, ambiguities, and contradic-

tions of the experienced world. As Jay puts it: “Reversing the traditional hierarchical privileging of timeless verities over transient appearances and tacitly rejecting the mystical quest for unity with the divine, Montaigne boldly asserted, ‘I do not portray being; I portray passing.’ Time, he understood, should not be measured against a putative eternal plenitude and found wanting; living in the moment was not inferior to living for eternity.”³ This integrative but sceptical holistic aspiration then gives the rest of the book its baseline, immediately counterposed to the pull toward science represented by Francis Bacon: “The scientific version [of a concept of experience], based on a transcendental, disembodied, immortal species subject located more in partial instruments than fallible bodies, activated the etymological link . . . between experience and experiment, while suppressing the value of accumulated wisdom from the past.”⁴ In Jay’s words: “. . . modern thinkers who were keen in ‘progressing’ beyond a state of relativistic tolerance for ambiguity and the endurance of life’s misfortunes could not rest content with Montaigne’s credo.”⁵

Rather briefly invoking Max Weber, Jay uses the notation of modernity as “a differentiation of increasingly specialized value spheres” to establish the overall framing for his book. His explication is worth quoting in full:

Cognitive, aesthetic, and moral institutions and discourses have gained relative autonomy and generated their own immanent logic of development. Indeed, within them, specialization produced a welter of distinct sub-spheres and isolated disciplines without easy commensurability. The whole, however it may be defined, ceased to hang together in a coherent way. No longer understood in terms of a great chain of being, a multiplicity of resonating similitudes, or a cosmopolis in which the cosmos and the polis are in tune with each other, the modern world struggled to come to terms with what Friedrich von Schiller, in the phrase made famous by Weber, called its ‘disenchantment.’ What Bruno Latour has identified as the modern disaggregation of hybrids into their component parts—subject and object, culture (or society) and nature, mind and matter—has meant a penchant for purification and boundary creation. Even if one avoids nostalgia for a supposed era before the fall into ‘diremption,’ ‘alienation,’ or ‘fragmentation,’ it does seem clear that modernity was accompanied by an increasing specialization of function and the loss of a more integrated sense of life.⁶

With Montaigne’s unified conception of holistic experience always in the background, this allows Jay to explore successively the resulting “discrete subvariants,” of which he distinguishes five. Each receives a substantive chapter, which in the conceit of the book’s title are presented as a series of “song cycles”: epistemology (René Descartes, John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, Immanuel Kant); religion (Friedrich Schleiermacher, William James, Rudolf Otto, Martin Buber); aesthetics (Kant again, John Dewey); politics (Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott,

Edward Thompson); and history (Wilhelm Dilthey, R. G. Collingwood, Joan Scott, Frank Ankersmit). The book then concludes with three chapters on what Jay sees as the major twentieth-century efforts at recuperating the possibility of a unified understanding of experience portable across these domains, treating successively US pragmatism (James, Dewey, Richard Rorty), the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno), and French poststructuralism (Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault).

The result is a *tour de force* of wide-ranging erudition, which endows each particularity with both contextual precision and historical depth. It is a rare pleasure, intellectually and pedagogically, to experience Jay's judicious attentiveness to the difficulties and contradictions that will always exceed the formal coherence required by his overarching purpose. The metaphor of journeying to an uncertain and undisclosed destination both opens and closes the book, and this quality of "openness to the world" or "interminability" structures its sensibility as well as its argumentation. For Jay, ultimately, this is the main lesson and injunction of "experience": namely, "a willingness to open the seemingly most integrated and self-contained subject to the outside, thus allowing the perilous, but rewarding journey to begin." If William Blake's ideas had rather oddly receded from the body of the book after conferring its title (and jacket illustration), in these closing paragraphs Jay also relinquishes the defining rationalism that guides the exposition in order to reinvoke those utopian poetics, suggesting that "the struggle itself is the reward, allowing those brave experimentations in living that tie experience to the future as much as the past."⁷

The richness, balance, and care of Jay's accounts cannot be gainsaid. For our purposes there are perhaps four main points to make. Three of these concern areas of potential critique, each of which also effectively locates Jay's perduring intellectual commitments in a formative moment that precedes the long advent of the so-called linguistic turn. In an extraordinarily impressive way Jay has continued doing what he has always done, namely to provide searchingly critical treatments of the central dilemmas of social, cultural, and political thought of the twentieth century that cross the boundaries between rivalrous intellectual traditions. As Francophone theory began challenging the hold over the US intellectual Left established by the Frankfurt School in the 1960s, Jay has always responded with generous-minded acuity (in *Downcast Eyes* to the tune of 600 carefully argued pages). But in the end he recurs to the ground he originally marked out in the *Dialectical Imagination*. What might we say about this career-long continuity?

First, Jay's writing continues to be moved by a humanist desire for a workable concept of totality. The plea at the end of *Songs of Experience* for an open-ended understanding of experience that can allow for both centeredness and fragmentation echoes the conclusion to *Marxism and Totality* twenty years before. There, ruminating on "The Challenge of Post-Structuralism," while reaffirming "the legacy left by the agonizingly flawed, yet admirably heroic, efforts made by

the Western Marxists to see things whole,” he wished for a “liberating totalization that will not turn into its opposite.” Once we abandon that commitment and retreat into “anti-holistic particularism,” he argued, “we are likely to suffer that terminal closure which will demonstrate what a serious rather than merely playful deconstruction of human culture really can mean.” To give up on the questions asked by the Western Marxists would be “to resign ourselves to a destiny against which everything that makes us human should compel us to resist.”⁸

Second, in this new book Jay’s method leads to a severely under-contextualized form of intellectual history. He apologizes for this relative thinness at the outset, explaining that “Our main cast of characters will be large and diverse enough to make any sustained attempt to contextualize the origin and development of their individual ideas practically impossible.”⁹ But the costs are high. Of course, contextualizing can mean various things. Thickness may consist in a greater density of textual readings, developed from both the immediate subjects themselves and the pertinent additional thinkers; in the richness of the biographical research, including use of the non-published archive; in the relating of thought to other kinds of social, cultural, and political history; in the deployment of relevant historiography; or in the drawing on other disciplines. Some of the best recent intellectual histories, Scott Specter’s *Prague Territories*, for example, or John Toews’ *Becoming Historical*, invariably exhibit all or several of these.¹⁰ This contextual thinness in Jay’s exposition also has bearing on his choice of particular thinkers, or rather on the unclear basis of their selection, because some notable absences emerge. Neither phenomenology nor Nietzscheanism, neither *Lebensphilosophie* nor the entire opening towards non-Western (that is, ‘Eastern’) philosophical traditions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, neither Wittgenstein nor Husserl, receive much effective acknowledgment. Nor, glaringly, does Freud. The virtual absence of feminism is likewise surprising. Given a different strategy of contextualizing, none of these neglects would have been feasible. Necessarily, the chapters closest to one’s own expertise prove the least satisfying in this regard. The benefits of Jay’s grand sweep—the gathering of so many diverse commentaries to the overarching theme of experience—are patent. The interesting question is whether, and in what form, some stronger elements of contextualizing might have been added.

Third, this book confirms Jay’s affiliations as a modernist of a rather classical kind. More clearly than his previous works, because it reaches much further back in time to the Enlightenment and far beyond, it reveals his critical identification with certain deep-historical genealogies of rationalist and humanist thought. Proceeding from a ground of Enlightenment philosophy (Modernism I, so to speak), though, he lingers most persistently in the territories of the later modernist interrogations of those traditions (Modernism II) between the *fin de siècle* and the rise of fascism. This was the terrain of his first two major books (three if we count *Adorno*), the second of which closed with a sustained reflection on the new

challenge of poststructuralism.¹¹ While extraordinarily impressive on its own terms, moreover, his principal substantive engagement with the latter is thematized and historicized around the particular question of the “denigration of vision” or “anti-ocularcentrism,” rather than being addressed to the fullness of its contemporary contexts.¹² His main commentaries on the politics of knowledge implicated in the poststructuralist challenge, still more in the discourse of postmodernism, have been reserved for his essays.¹³ In these terms, Jay’s career has evolved in parallel with the developments registered by the other two books under review, always cognisant, often directly in dialogue, but definitely not on board.

For our purposes perhaps the most interesting aspect of Jay’s book, finally, is that it concentrates on ‘experience’ in the first place. As he observes, a major effort was expended by Joan Scott and other advocates of the linguistic turn during the early 1990s in displacing the concept from serious analytical use.¹⁴ Scott had developed a decisive critique of the projects of retrieval and trans-temporal identification motivating many of the proliferating social histories of the 1960s and 1970s conceived as “history from below,” including feminist histories, insisting instead on the complex discursive disjunctions and mediations that rendered past experiences epistemologically unavailable in such foundational terms. The “evidence of experience” could never be the secure ground of analysis because experience was always already a discursively constructed category. Accordingly, “we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experience.”¹⁵ Because experience was always linguistically informed and inflected, Scott argued, the agency and subjectivity of past actors could only ever be accessed by means of the traces they left in haphazardly surviving documents that were never purely or straightforwardly their own.

While placing the concept of experience seriously into question for anyone seeking to understand the consequences of the linguistic turn, this powerful intervention was aimed politically against those who claimed experience as a source of historical authority in essentializing ways. For those voices, Scott argued, history was invoked “to essentialize identity and reify the subject,” enabling certain kinds of priorities politically while disallowing and delegitimizing others:

In some circles experience is the ground for an identity politics that understands differences among its constituents to be matters of false consciousness or opportunism. Experience is taken as an accurate description of closed systems of domination and oppression; knowledge is taken to be the simple reflection of objective experience. That’s the version of experience I want to call into question, substituting for it a notion of experience as a theorized reading that is made possible, but not inevitably or singularly, by one’s relationship to dominant institutions and discourses.¹⁶

If Scott had also granted that realistically “*experience* is not a word we can do without,” so that it could scarcely be abandoned altogether, then in practice it migrated to the margins and interstices of most theoretically informed historiography during the ensuing years.¹⁷ From having “represented the promise of social history to render audible the voices of previously silenced historical actors, to explicate the layers of meaning in their actions and interventions in history,” Kathleen Canning observes, it now “faded from the center stage of historical productions, rarely featured in book titles, and no longer constituted either an object of investigation or a methodological approach.” From once having “marked the crossroads where ‘social being’ and ‘social thought’ coalesced and converged . . . the category of experience was dislodged from its location at these epistemological crossroads and relegated to the sidelines, where it remained an empty shell stripped of the traces of its past significance.”¹⁸ But if rarely explicitly acknowledged, experience continued to speak through the works of social and cultural historians, especially those of the practitioners of *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) and others of an anthropological disposition, where it figured as “the unspoken, the implicitly materialized and oppositional counterpart of the discursive and/or the narrative.”¹⁹ “[D]ivested of its complexity, of the layers of memory and emotion, of the passions and positionings that propelled historical change at crucial turning points, such as desire, rage, despair, resistance,” experience became re-positioned as the binary other to discourse. Yet in exactly this same period, the remarkable burgeoning of new historical work in areas like “memory, body, and subjectivity” has patently instated *precisely* the experiential, however carefully redescribed, as an inescapable ground of study.²⁰ Given this continuing concern with experience—the prevalence of the concept “in a practical state,” so to speak—it becomes a matter of some urgency to re-elaborate a workable concept of experience somewhere beyond the dichotomous framework (experience *versus* discourse) left behind by Scott’s necessary critique. Not the least of the salutary contributions of Martin Jay’s new book is to have helped recover the complex conceptual terrain upon which this might fruitfully occur.

Turning now to Elizabeth Clark’s *History, Theory, Text*, we find a fine and scrupulous account of the wider and deeper intellectual histories of historiography that brought avowed poststructuralists like Scott to the standpoints they were adopting by the early 1990s. A distinguished historian of early Christianity, Clark’s purpose is to bring the gains of ‘critical’ or ‘postmodern’ theory into a region of the discipline where so far their impact has been small, namely late antiquity and the early medieval eras. As it happens, only one of Clark’s eight chapters (thirty pages out of 185) is devoted specifically to that purpose, leaving the lion’s share for an exhaustive account of theories of history between the mid-nineteenth century and the present more generally. The results are hugely valuable for anyone seeking this kind of guide, irrespective of any interest in early medieval history per se. Such exegesis is hardly particularly new, but Clark delivers a survey of such

completeness and explanatory care that it deserves a place on any syllabus of critical introductions to these debates.

The book begins with Rankean historical positivism and its reception in the United States in the later nineteenth century, when history began to be constituted as a discipline. As she moves through the twentieth century Clark traverses the ground of Peter Novick's now classic anatomy of the American historical profession, *That Noble Dream*, moving briskly past the early dissenting critiques of Charles Beard and Carl Becker, before alighting among the epistemological debates of our own time.²¹ If here Clark focuses on mapping the overall terrain, marshaling a remarkable range of contemporary references (for a twenty-page chapter these amount to seventeen pages of 177 endnotes), the second chapter moves into a more particularized discussion of Anglo-American analytical philosophy centering on the logical positivism of Carl Hempel and Karl Popper. This is perhaps the least interesting piece of the book, mainly because (*pave* Arthur Danto) it remains unclear how far such currents acquired either broader intellectual resonance or institutional presence among historians at large. In comparison, the next chapter on "Language and Structures" provides an admirably taut and accessible twenty-page guide to the specific importance of structuralism in the 1960s, beginning with Saussurian linguistics and proceeding through the impact of Claude Lévi-Strauss. The great virtue of this discussion, which properly moves the book into high gear, is to have recovered the isolable characteristics of the structuralist moment *per se*, for by the time of Joan Scott's interventions in the mid 1980s that had become largely subsumed into the generalized appropriation of 'French theory' without any longer being distinguished from the intervening poststructuralist departures.²² Once French theoretical influences began sweeping parts of the American academy by the turn of the 1980s, the boundaries between 'structuralist' and 'poststructuralist' orientations had become confusingly scrambled. The pervasiveness of the influence of Foucault and rapid lionizing of Jacques Derrida by literary scholars then made it much harder to see the complex passages actually negotiated out of structuralism inside France itself.²³ Clark now successfully retrieves that sequence. As she says, "several features of the structuralist program" lasted into the succeeding period, "including its denaturalization of culture, its privileging of discontinuity over continuity, its semiotic interpretation of culture, its injunction to break down and rebuild the object of study, and its attention to the self-referring quality of language."²⁴

On that basis Clark reviews the genealogies of the historiographical present. She distinguishes three main strands, devoting a chapter successively to each. She begins with the most innovative and theoretically self-conscious influences coming in the 1960s and 1970s from inside the discipline itself, including *Annales* in France, microhistory in Italy, and Marxist historiography in Britain. She then continues via the various narratological critiques of Paul Ricoeur, Paul Veyne, and Roland Barthes to explicate the new narrativism of Hayden White, Hans Kellner,

and Frank Ankersmit. She concludes with the new intellectual history exemplified in the U S by Dominic LaCapra, in France by Michel de Certeau, Roger Chartier, and of course Foucault. Here the highly compressed quality of the accounts is only partially compensated by the accompanying density of the endnotes. While legitimately selective, sometimes the coverage inevitably frustrates. For example, two paragraphs on *Begriffsgeschichte* (the history of concepts associated with Reinhart Koselleck, Otto Brunner, and Werner Conze), and two on *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) can make little sense for anyone who does not already have some familiarity with the West German historical scene.²⁵ Nonetheless, overall these are exceptionally well handled critical surveys of the relevant bodies of writing.

The red thread of metacritique running through these chapters concerns what Clark sees as a shying away from overtly self-conscious theorizing or an aversion against epistemology, a pattern recurring often enough, she argues, to warrant description as a generalized syndrome. Either the historians under discussion show a tendency to back away from theory in the name of an appeal to the 'real' of the evidence in the archive; or by the very virtue of taking an overtly theoretical stance they effectively marginalize themselves. If Eric Hobsbawm becomes an example of the former, then for Clark both Hayden White and Foucault figure as the latter.²⁶ At one rather limited level that might be true of Hobsbawm and the other British Marxist historians, although an absence in their writings of formal abstraction should not be taken to mean that no theory is inscribed or embedded there. But the claim *vis à vis* White and Foucault seems merely perverse: the influence of *Metahistory* (published in 1973) certainly took time to percolate, but via the larger impact of the linguistic turn it rapidly came into its own; likewise, Foucault may not have been taken up by historians during the 1970s, but by the end of the following decade he was everywhere.

Still more to the point, advocacy of the linguistic turn during the later 1980s and 1990s proceeded more generally by means of explicit and sustained attentiveness to epistemology, sometimes obsessively so. It was certainly the case that the partisans of poststructuralism and postmodernism during those debates routinely denied to their opponents any comparable sophistication with theory, and Clark is by no means the first commentator to imply that a proper degree of theoretical self-consciousness announced itself only with Joan Scott's self-reinvention and the arrival of Dominick LaCapra. Yet as ought to be clear, theoretically informed history was being produced in parts of the discipline well before the 1980s, if with considerably less fanfare. Indeed, the practical eclecticism essayed by many historians as they tried out the new ideas from France was a far more sophisticated, productive, and honourable form of intellectual engagement than the emergent epistemological avant-garde of the time were ever willing to acknowledge. At the end of her own treatment of the new intellectual history, Clark herself cautions against an over-radicalized conception of textuality, because

seeking to ‘textualize’ the social or ‘nontextual world’ can be no less misguided than continuing to treat texts transparently as the repository of practices and events ‘as they really were.’ Yet the import of that caution seems not so far removed from the kind of epistemological eclecticism that tends to appear rather as a weakness when Clark is expounding the discussions of the 1970s and 1980s.²⁷

The final pay-off for Clark comes in her final chapter, which employs “LaCapra’s conception of the intellectual historian’s task . . . [as] a helpful charter for the reconsideration of early Christian history.”²⁸ For our purposes the penultimate chapter on “Texts and Contexts” is the more relevant, as it provides a beautifully distilled account of the kinds of analysis the linguistic turn has enabled. There Clark guides us through some of the major interchanges among intellectual historians, while considering the broader cross-disciplinary interest, notably among cultural anthropologists and new cultural historians, in expanding the notion of textuality for the purpose of rendering social and cultural practices, as well as literary texts, susceptible to interpretive readings. After briefly exploring the rigorous understanding of textuality offered by Derrida, Foucault, and Ricoeur, she then counterposes Derrida’s and LaCapra’s powerful iterations of the latter against the contextualist standpoints of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock.²⁹ She closes the chapter with a brilliantly succinct critique of Clifford Geertz’s project of a textualized interpretive anthropology and its enormous resonance among historians since the 1970s, closing with a brief but equally telling citation of the debate among Robert Darnton, Chartier, and LaCapra in the mid-1980s about the methods of the emergent new cultural history.³⁰ The big issue that remains unresolved at the end of these lucid and astute commentaries, however, is that of social contextualization, or the possible ground from which the “extra-textual” might then be theorized and approached. If in adjudicating the various debates presented in this chapter Clark’s sympathies seem consistently drawn toward the stronger versions of textuality, she still seeks ways *back* and *out* from the text to its contexts of social production. She chooses to explore that conundrum in the book’s final chapter via Gabrielle Spiegel’s idea of the “social logic of the text,” but the possibilities are left tantalizingly unresolved.³¹

This dualism, I would argue, between “the site of the text’s production and . . . the text’s own productivity,” which becomes further compounded by the multiplicity both of possible readings and of imaginable readers, describes *the* space of difficulty and creativity for historians writing now. Clark has positioned her book self-consciously *inside* that continuing moment. As she says, there is now very widespread scepticism about the large-scale explanatory and developmental frameworks that until recently formed the default ground from which historians tended to approach their studies in time and place—those “‘grand narratives’ that often mask ideological presuppositions, as well as categories such as ‘experience’ if understood as a foundational court of appeal.” Large numbers of historians, particularly of younger generations and especially those currently in graduate

school, “implicitly or explicitly acknowledge that a correspondence theory of verification is untenable, and that their own *representations* are not to be confused with *reference*.” The possibility of the retrieval or reconstruction of an empirically available past has certainly not ceased to inspire historians’ imaginations or move their desire. But their understanding of the kind of claims exactly which a process of historical reconstruction can enable has become far less confident, far more uncertain and mediated than before. As Clark says, these days many “look less to historical continuity . . . than to discontinuity, noting both breaks in the larger historical order and the gaps, absences, aporias, and contradictions in texts.” They understand that “as intellectual constructions” their histories cannot be identical with ‘the past’ but rather remain irresolvably different. In that sense the past has irretrievably “vanished” and can become “available only through ‘traces.’” Finally, “no historical construction is ‘politically innocent’ but is driven by the problems and questions set by the historian in the present.”³²

If for some historians these recognitions have been unsettling, provoking many anxieties and a sense of threat, for others they have seemed like an opportunity, opening the way for a more creative and experimental set of approaches.³³ If ‘history’ can now be regarded as the unattainable or unreachable ‘real’ of past time, which in its completeness or any supposed objective or essential coherence is neither recoverable nor directly accessible, that does not somehow render the historian’s labours nugatory. Those labours comprise the craft knowledge, repertoire of methodologies, breadth of theoretical awareness, and organizing intelligence which the historian brings to the necessarily unfinishable work of representation. They comprise everything devoted to rendering the past readable. Here we can distinguish between ‘the past’ as the object of study, which historians seek to appropriate in the form of knowledge, and ‘history’ as the stories, analyses, and representations produced about the past, which we might rather call ‘historiography.’ Between ‘the past’ and ‘history qua historiography’ are then interposed two necessary and inescapable barriers: on the one hand, the ‘archive,’ or all the stuff and matter that can be turned into ‘facts’ and ‘evidence’; and on the other hand, the historian’s interventions, which impart to that stuff and matter coherent narrative or interpretive form.

That is, the past can be made knowable only by an active process of construction, which shapes not only the ensuing interpretations, but even the documentation on which these have to be based. This mediating and constructive agency of the historian is managed through language, through the operative analytical categories, and through the entire cognitive apparatus historians bring to their study. Of course, the ‘real past’ is not a figment of our imagination. But *that* past is simply not reachable or self-evident as such: if the past has actually existed, it can never acquire meaning until the historian begins shaping it as history. In other words, we need to distinguish between the past traces of an earlier time (the past-as-history) and the labours of reconstruction which inscribe those traces with

meaning (history-as-knowledge). The one is never attainable *except* by the mediation of the other, and consequently the knowledge historians deliver can only ever be partial, provisional, and decisively prefigured by the historian's complex particularities of outlook. If we put these first two ideas together—the irrecoverable remoteness of the past (its necessary non-identity with history), and its fashioning into history by the historian's manufacture of coherence (the writing of 'the past' into 'history' by the shaping of narrative)—then we come easily to a third idea, namely, the growing attention now being paid to the specifically literary qualities of historical work. The key early influence here, of course, was Hayden White, whose *Metahistory* argued that all works of history, even when adhering single-mindedly to the rules of evidence, standards of objectivity, and a 'scientific' method, are constructed nonetheless around predictable narratological forms, drawing on finite modes of argumentation, types of emplotment, ideological frames, and rhetorical tropes.

The views I have just expounded would make me a 'postmodernist' in the sense claimed by the avowed 'postmodernist historians' of the 1990s. The three arguments described above probably should count as the enduring legacy of those interventions, around which it might even be possible these days for a reasonably broad if tentative consensus to coalesce: first, regarding the irrecoverable remoteness of the past; second, regarding the necessary constructedness of historiography; and third, regarding the necessity of a formalist narratology for any full understanding of the complex mediations between 'the past-as-history' and 'history-as-knowledge' that will always already be present in the writings and labours of historians. But beyond this ground lies a more difficult terrain, where the historian's distinctive knowledge and practices (history's epistemologies?) start to become far less distinct, and instead begin blurring into those of other disciplines, such as those of literary studies. It is here, I think, that we find ourselves recurring to that ground of contextualization which surfaced at several points during my discussion of the books by Martin Jay and Elizabeth Clark above—namely, that desirable density of all the elaborate, careful, and creative contextualizing and readings that we do in order to assemble the kind of archive our historiography has to presuppose.

In other words, as historians we can accept all the arguments that literary theorists would make about history's textuality—about aporia and incommensurability, about the necessary heterogeneity and unfinishedness that has to be worked upon before history can appear as a unity, about the forms of narratological equivalence associating history with fiction, about the necessary presentation of contradictions over the chimera of wanting to resolve them, about the distinctions between narrative and history, representation and the real. We can acknowledge the productivity of the tension between the necessarily incomplete attempts in historiography to capture complexity in coherent and unified narratives on the one hand, and on the other hand the persisting multiplicity of temporalities intersect-

ing inside particular moments and events of the past, which will always have to remain unrepresentable in some final sense. We can accept all of that. But perhaps that is the point at which the historian's distinctive labours really begin.

Notes

1. To them may be added *Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984) and a series of volumes of essays: *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988); *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993); *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); *Refractions of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
2. *Marxism and Totality* concludes with a fascinating discussion of "The Challenge of Post-Structuralism," (510-537) exactly as the thought of Foucault, Derrida, and others was about to spread beyond the seminar rooms of some English departments into the general awareness of historians and other disciplines.
3. Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 24.
4. *Ibid.*, 38.
5. *Ibid.*, 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 408-409.
8. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 536-537. Strikingly, these passages were written during the early 1980s under the shadow of the second Cold War, the revival of the nuclear arms race, and what Edward Thompson called the rise of 'exterminism.' Without ever relapsing into the more simplistic and stridently polemical charges leveled by some traditionalist Marxists and other hostile critics of 'postmodernism,' Jay brought great lucidity during this period to the spaces of political unease created by the impact of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Equivalent concerns about the political entailments of the global exigencies of survival and sustainability might now be leveled at the early-twenty-first century present. For the pertinent intellectual-political context of the early 1980s, see New Left Review eds., *Exterminism and Cold War* (London: Verso, 1982), especially Edward Thompson, "Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization," 1-33.
9. Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 5.
10. Scott Specter, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Kafka's Fin de Siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
11. See note 2 above. See also Martin Jay ed., *An Unmastered Past: The Autobiographical Reflections of Leo Lowenthal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), especially Jay's "Introduction," 1-8.
12. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.
13. See especially Jay, *Fin de Siècle Socialism*, and *Cultural Semantics*.
14. See Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991): 773-97, reprinted in ed. Terrence J. McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 379-406. For discussion of the powerful impact and unresolved difficulties left by Scott's critique, see above all Kathleen Canning, "Feminist

History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” and “Difficult Dichotomies: ‘Experience’ between Narrativity and Materiality,” in Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 63-100, 101-120. Jay’s own discussion of Scott’s impact is in *Songs of Experience*, 249-255.

15. Scott, “Evidence,” 779.

16. For the first quoted phrase, see Scott, “Evidence,” 797. The block quotation is taken from Joan W. Scott, “A Rejoinder to Thomas Holt,” in eds. James K. Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, *Questions of Evidence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 399.

17. Scott, “Evidence,” 797.

18. Canning, “Difficult Dichotomies,” 101. While neither seeking to refute nor disavowing Scott’s vital critique, Canning builds brilliantly on its contribution to explore the foreshortenings and subsequent silences it tended to encourage.

19. *Ibid.*, 102.

20. *Ibid.*, 103. The illustrative citations are potentially endless, but as a major instance of work on memory, which simultaneously explores the presence of the author’s own experiences in shaping the analysis, Canning cites Michel Trouillot’s work on the Haitian Revolution, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); and for work on the body, Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor’s Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). See also Susan A. Crane, “Historical Subjectivity: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Modern History*, 78 (2006): 434-56.

21. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

22. I am referring here to Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), especially “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” 28-50, originally published in *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986): 1053-1075.

23. In British intellectual life, arguably, at least among younger Marxist and other left academics, the reception of structuralism began earlier in the 1960s and proved more discretely enabling in relation to the later arrival of poststructuralism. Though Clark valuably decouples these two moments, she does not distinguish these separate English-speaking trajectories.

24. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 62.

25. *Ibid.*, 112-113, 77-78.

26. *Ibid.*, 83-85, 100, 114.

27. *Ibid.*, 129. For my own effort at sorting through these consequences of the linguistic turn amidst the culture wars among historians during an early stage of the rise of contemporary interdisciplinarity (written originally in 1990), see Geoff Eley, “Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later,” in ed. Terrence J. McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 193-243. This has recently been reprinted in a shortened form in ed. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 35-61.

28. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 129.

29. Any full list of citations would outgrow the bounds of this essay, but see in particular

- the following essays by Dominick LaCapra: "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in eds. LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 47-85; "Culture and Ideology: From Geertz to Marx," and "Intellectual History and Critical Theory," in LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 133-154 and 182-209. See also David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), and "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *American Historical Review*, 94 (1989): 581-609. 'Contextualism' for Skinner entails something both more and less than some broader uses of the term, such as my own notation earlier in this essay: ". . . context for Skinner does not always lie in the realm of the social and economic, as many social historians assume: he privileges linguistic, generic, and ideological contexts, attempting to ascertain the range of meanings that particular words would have conveyed to people of the society in which the text was produced." See Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 138-139. For Skinner, see his classic essay of 1969, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, 8 (1969): 3-53; and ed. James Tully, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).
30. Again, full references cannot be provided here. Clark's discussion of Geertzian interpretive anthropology and the critiques of Darnton can be found in *History, Theory, Text*, 145-155.
31. *Ibid.*, 162-65. See Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 65 (1990): 59-86.
32. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 7.
33. For those working at the most experimental end of the current historiographical spectrum, see eds. Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone, *Experiments in Rethinking History* (New York: Routledge, 2004), which anthologizes the first seven years of the newly established journal *Rethinking History*.