

HISTORIANS AND THEIR FACTS

I

WHAT is a historical fact? Sir Geoffrey Elton, for one, had no doubts about the matter (there were indeed few things about which he had doubts). A historical fact was something that happened in the past, which had left traces in documents which could be used by the historian to reconstruct it in the present. In order to perform this operation successfully, the historian had in the first place to shed all prejudices and preconceptions and approach the documents with a completely open mind. "Ideological theory," Elton declared, "threatens the work of the historian by subjecting him to predetermined explanatory schemes and thus forcing him to tailor his evidence so that it fits the so-called paradigm imposed from outside." He argued instead that the material left to us the past must be read "in the context of the day that produced it. . . . The present must be kept out of the past if the search for the truth of that past is to move towards such success as in the circumstances is possible."¹ Thus the historian's questions should be formulated not by some present theory but from the historical sources themselves.²

In putting forward this view, Elton was disagreeing strongly with E. H. Carr's definition of a historical fact. Carr argued that a past event did not become a historical fact until it was accepted as such

historian's work begins at the archive door. In reality, it begins long before. The historian formulates a thesis, goes looking for evidence, and discovers facts.⁸

Fact and evidence are therefore conceptually distinct and should not be confused with each other. Not only Carr but other writers on this subject get the two mixed up. The question of what is a fact, for instance, plunges the postmodernist writer Alan Munslow into terrible confusion. He puts the word "fact" into the quarantine of quotation marks, as if it were some loathsomely infectious concept it was dangerous to touch. "Can professional historians," he asks, "be relied upon to reconstruct and explain the past objectively by inferring the 'facts' from the evidence . . . ?" Obviously not, is the implied answer to this plainly rhetorical question. Here Munslow seems to use "evidence" in the sense of "sources." Elsewhere he cites a well-known history of America which states that President James Madison was "small of stature . . . light of weight . . . bald of head, and weak of voice."⁹ The implication is that he was a weak president (though why this should be so is unclear; one can think of many men with bald heads who were not at all weak, such as Julius Caesar; many powerful men who were light and small in physique, such as Napoleon; and many strong leaders who had feeble speaking voices, such as Bismarck). Munslow says this is translating evidence into facts; here he seems to have a different concept of evidence, though exactly what he means by it is not very clear. It is surely more helpful to say that in this example the writers (if that is what they are indeed doing) are translating *facts* (bald head, weak voice, etc.) into *evidence*, using undoubted facts about Madison's physical characteristics as evidence for a more interpretative point about his inner character and the nature of his presidency. When Munslow asserts that the historians in question present Madison's weakness as a fact, he is misusing the concept. It is only by reversing the normal senses of fact and interpretation, indeed, that he is able to argue that the latter generates the former and not the other way around.⁸

But the terminological confusion that has bedeviled the whole debate about historical facts does not stop here. A similar misunderstanding to that engendered by Carr can be found in the distinction

drawn by White between facts and events. An event, he tells us, is something that happened, but a fact is something constructed by the historian or existing in the remains of the past, in documents.⁹ In historical terms, I think it fair to say, a fact does not have to be an event; for example, it could be a building, now long since disappeared, in a certain place, or a boundary between two states, or a set of stocks and shares owned by a government minister, or a legal prohibition of some activity or other, or a liaison between a politician and a courtesan, or the thickness of armor plating on a battleship or tank, or any one of a vast range of things, none of which could be described as an "event," even if it was connected to an event. An event is a fact, but a fact is not necessarily an event. History is not just about events; it is about many other aspects of the past, too, and that applies not just to economic, social, cultural, or intellectual history but to much more "event-oriented" kinds of history, such as political or military history, as well.¹⁰

Thus White is wrong to imply that historiographical consensus about any event in the past is difficult to achieve and is always open to revision from another perspective, if he means that future historians will start to say that the Stalybridge Wakes did not take place in 1850, or that there were no gingerbread salesmen there (they were recorded in the newspapers already cited), or make some other factual assertion of this kind. Only if new evidence is found to amend or cast doubt on the historian's account of a fact—as in the case of the (now seemingly rather dubious) story of the gingerbread seller's death at the Stalybridge Wakes—does revision at this level take place. But it is doubtful whether White really does mean this. If he means, as I think he does, that there will always be argument about what the alleged death of the gingerbread salesman meant for the state of public order in Victorian England and how it is to be interpreted as evidence for larger arguments about the period, then surely he is right.¹¹

II

WHAT is at issue, therefore, is how historians use documents not to establish discrete facts, but as evidence for establishing the larger pat-

terns that connect them. Are these patterns, these connections already there waiting to be discovered by a neutral process of cognition, or do historians put them there themselves? Some writers on history have argued that historians are deceiving themselves if they imagine their documents to be a kind of transparent window through which larger truths about the past become visible. So great, they suggest, are the problems which the documents present that the "traditional confidence" of historians that they can get their facts "right," or reach through the sources to the "essential truth" beyond, is completely misplaced.¹³ In this view, as the American medievalist Nancy F. Partner has observed, historical "facts" become "constructed artifacts no different in cognitive origin than any made thing or 'fiction.'" ¹⁴ "The basic claim of historians that their narratives rest on fact," two of her colleagues have confidently asserted, "can be, indeed has been, dismantled."¹⁵ This is not least because "documents," as Dominick LaCapra has remarked, "are texts that supplement or rework 'reality' and not mere sources that divulge facts about 'reality.'" ¹⁶ Documents are always written from somebody's point of view, with a specific purpose and audience in mind, and unless we can find all that out, we may be misled. Too often, claims LaCapra, historians unwittingly carry the biases of such documents directly into their own writing (or, as he puts it, "All history, moreover, must more or less blindly encounter the problem of a transferential relation to the past whereby the processes at work in the object of study acquire their displaced analogues in the historian's account.")¹⁷ Thus he concludes, "Historians often read texts as simple sources of information on the level of content analysis."¹⁸ This amounts in his view to a "reductive use of texts and documents."¹⁹

In similar vein, another American historian, Catriona Kelly, has claimed as an achievement of postmodernist theory the fact that "antagonistic, combative and counter-intuitive strategies of textual reading" have all been "developed in the wake of deconstructionism." She urges historians to adopt an "aggressive attitude" to the sources, "concentrating not on the most obvious interpretation, but on secondary layers of meaning." But this injunction has had little measurable effect. "The impact of non-referential language theory,

deconstruction and the exposure of hegemonic interests embedded in what used to pass for neutral description" has not, as Nancy F. Partner has noted, "left the ancient discipline shattered beyond recuperation."²⁰ This is perhaps because "reading against the grain," as Kelly tells historians they should now begin to do, has been the stock-in-trade of our profession for a very long time.²¹ Historians, as Lawrence Stone has protested, were even in his youth ("forty or fifty years ago") taught "that documents—we did not call them texts in those days—were written by fallible human beings who made mistakes, asserted false claims, and had their own ideological agenda which guided their compilation; they should therefore be scrutinized with care, taking into account authorial intent, the nature of the document, and the context in which it was written." Since he also says in the same article, written in 1992, that he was taught "forty or fifty years ago" that "we should follow the advice of E. H. Carr and before we read the history, examine the background of the historian," and since Carr did not proffer such advice until the publication of *What Is History?* in 1961, or in other words only thirty years before, we may perhaps doubt whether Stone really was taught all these things in his youth. But he clearly believes them now, and indeed he is right to say that these are all assumptions on which historians conventionally operate. He also claims to have been taught "that perceptions and representations of reality are often very different from, and sometimes just as historically important as, reality itself," and this, too, is a fact of which any historian dealing with original source material is often only too painfully aware, since it makes the task of writing history a good deal more complicated than it would be if sources were indeed the kind of one-to-one reflection of the real world that post-modernists apparently believe historians think they are.²²

"The whole art of historical research, in many cases," as Raphael Samuel pointed out in one of his last writings, "is to *detach* documents from the 'discourse' of which they formed a part and juxtapose them with qualitatively different others." This involves not ignoring or discounting the language in which they are written, but comparing it with the language of the other documents in question. Ever since the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, historians have

grappled with the problem of "measuring words against deeds," as Samuel says, "and attempting to judge their representativity." It might be illuminating in some cases to juxtapose seemingly unrelated events, or to range freely through history, as the French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault does, ignoring questions of historical specificity unless they can be assimilated to free-floating discourses. But the general value of such an exercise is limited. "Instead of grubbing about in the archives," Samuel complains, "they [i.e., postmodernists] can take the higher ground where universes of meaning clash and craggy peaks dispel the clouds of unknowing. Instead of painstakingly documenting the past, they can imaginatively re-invent it."²² Samuel's feeling that this kind of freedom can be achieved only by a measure of intellectual irresponsibility is palpable.

The real question at issue here is *what enables us* to read a source "against the grain," and here theory does indeed come in. Theory of whatever kind, whether it is a general set of theses about how human societies are structured and human beings behave or whether it is a limited proposition about, say, the carnivalesque in history, or the nature of human communication within a preindustrial village, derives from the historian's present, not from the historian's sources. It is vital for the historian to use it. Without anthropological theory developed in the study of African rural society in the twentieth century, for example, the history of witchcraft in the seventeenth century would not have made the huge leaps in understanding which it has achieved in the last twenty-five years, gains which have come about because only anthropological theory, for example, enabled Keith Thomas to read the sources in a new and original way.²³ Without Marxist theory, urban and labor history would be enormously impoverished, and a major, influential classic such as E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* would never have been written.²⁴ Without modern economic theory, historians would have no understanding of industrialization and would not have known how to read or use the quantitative and other evidence that it generated.

If ideas and theories in the historian's own time are what allow a reading of documentary material in a way that cuts across, or runs

counter, to the purposes of the people who wrote it, then it follows that the same document can be legitimately used as evidence for a variety of purposes by different historians. It is manifestly not the case that there is always a one-to-one correspondence between the evidence provided in a source or a document and the fact to which it refers. Thus, for example, in his famous book *Montaillou*, the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie read the inquisitorial reports for different evidence and in many cases different facts from those quarried from them by previous writers. While they had been interested in the Inquisition itself, and in the Cathar heresy it was attempting to extirpate, Le Roy Ladurie was interested in using the *incidental* details the heretics revealed about their everyday lives to construct an intimate portrait of human relationships and human existence in a medieval village.²⁵ Characteristically, Sir Geoffrey Elton criticized him for doing this, considering he should have stuck to the Inquisition, as his predecessors had done.²⁶ But it is difficult to see any justification for this argument. Elton is completely wrong in his view that there is only one legitimate way to read a given document. Documents can be read in a variety of ways, all of them, theoretically at least, equally valid. Moreover, it is obvious that our way of reading a source derives principally from our present-day concerns and from the questions that present-day theories and ideas lead us to formulate. Nor is there anything wrong in this.

Critics of "documentary fetishism" have homed in on this point and treated the Eltonian position as if it were a universally accepted orthodoxy. The intellectual historian H. Stuart Hughes has leveled the charge that historians in the United States "seem to have forgotten—if they ever properly learned—the simple truth that what one may call progress in their endeavors comes not merely through the discovery of new materials but at least as much through a *new reading* of materials already available."²⁷ Hughes of course has a strong vested interest in asserting this "simple truth," since he has never discovered any new material himself in any of his publications but has devoted his entire career to going over old ground. His view is shared by William H. McNeill, of the University of Chicago, who used the occasion of his presidential address to the American Historical

Association in 1986 to castigate his colleagues for practicing a "historiography that aspires to get closer and closer to the documents—all the documents and nothing but the documents"—because this meant "merely moving closer and closer to incoherence, chaos, and meaninglessness."²⁸ Coming from a historian whose lifelong specialism had been in the history of the whole world from the beginnings of humanity to the present, and whose acquaintance with original documents was correspondingly limited, this view was perhaps unsurprising, if somewhat tactlessly expressed.

In a slightly wider sense, perhaps Elton was right to note that criticisms of "documentary fetishism" and the advocacy of reinterpretation as the primary task of the historian have mainly emanated from intellectual historians. After all, they use sources in a different way from most historians: as interpretative vehicles for ideas, not as clues to an exterior reality. Moreover, they work with a very limited number of classic texts, written by a handful of authors or, in other words, in a field where new documentary discoveries have inevitably become extremely rare. Reinterpretation is therefore often the only option available to them. When an intellectual historian reads Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Marx's *Das Kapital*, it is not in order to use their writings to reconstruct something outside them, but in order to construct an interpretation of what they mean or meant. There are indeed many interpretations of these thinkers' ideas, not least because the systems of thought Hobbes and Marx constructed were so wide-ranging that they never became completely closed. But the possibility of reinterpreting them by means of new documentary discoveries has almost ceased (though one can never be completely sure that no new documents by or about them will turn up, scholars have been combing every conceivable archive for them for decades, and it seems rather unlikely).²⁹

The impatience of intellectual historians with their colleagues' concern for the discovery of original documentation seems understandable, but it is also reasonable to call for a little academic tolerance here; historical knowledge and understanding can surely be generated both by the discovery of new documents and by the imaginative reinterpretation of old ones. The discovery of the Dead Sea

Scrolls in 1947, for instance, imposed a new agenda of interpretation irrespective of contemporary political assumptions. At the same time, Charles Beard's reinterpretation of the American Constitution owed little to newly discovered documents, yet transformed our knowledge and generated massive debate that led to a real advance in historical understanding.³⁰ Historians are always led by their present-day concerns; the truth does not simply emerge from an unprejudiced or neutral reading of the sources, even if such a thing were possible; the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves have been the subject of huge controversy almost since their discovery. Not all sources are equally open to a variety of interpretations or uses, and some indeed can only reasonably be interpreted in a single way. Others, like philosophical texts, can be, and have been, subject to almost constant reinterpretation over the years. Some sources are used to get at a historical reality beyond themselves; others are studied for their own sake. Historians work in a variety of ways, and specialists in one field should not censure their colleagues in another for failing to conform to the pet methods they employ in their own.

III

THE traces left by the past, as Dominick LaCapra has observed, do not provide an even coverage of it. Archives are the product of the chance survival of some documents and the corresponding chance loss or deliberate destruction of others. They are also the products of the professional activities of archivists, which therefore shape the record of the past and with it the interpretations of historians. Archivists have often weeded out records they consider unimportant, while retaining those they consider of lasting value. This might mean, for example, destroying vast and therefore bulky personnel files on low-ranking state employees, such as ordinary soldiers and seamen, manual workers, and so on, while keeping room on the crowded shelves for personnel files on high state officials. Yet such a weeding policy reflected a view that many historians would now find outmoded, a view which considered "history" only as the history of the

elites. Documents which seem worthless to one age, and hence ripe for the shredder, can seem extremely valuable to another.

Let me give an example from my personal experience. During research in the Hamburg state archives in the 1980s, I became aware that the police had been sending plainclothes agents into the city's pubs and bars during the two decades or so before the First World War to gather and later write down secret reports of what was being said in them by socialist workers. The reports I saw were part of larger files on the various organizations to which these workers belonged. Thinking it might be interesting to look at a wider sample, I went through a typewritten list of the police files with the archivist, and among the headings we came across was one which read: "worthless reports." After going down into the muniment room, we found under the relevant call number a vast mass of over twenty thousand reports which had been judged of insufficient interest by the police authorities of the day to be taken up into the thematic files where I had first encountered this material. It was only by a lucky chance that they had not already been destroyed. They turned out to contain graphic and illuminating accounts of what rank-and-file socialist workers thought about almost every conceivable issue of the day, from the Dreyfus affair in France to the state of the traffic on Hamburg's busy streets. Nobody had ever looked at them before. Historians of the labor movement had been interested only in organization and ideology. But by the time I came to inspect them, interest had shifted to the history of everyday life, and workers' views on the family, crime and the law, food, drink, and leisure pursuits had become significant objects of historical research. It seemed worth transcribing and publishing a selection, therefore, which I did after a couple of years' work on them." The resulting collection showed how rank-and-file Social Democrats and labor activists often had views that cut right across the Marxist ideology in which previous historians thought the party had indoctrinated them because they had lacked the sources to go down beyond the level of official pronouncements in the way the Hamburg police reports made it possible to do. Thus from "worthless reports" there emerged a useful corrective to earlier historical interpretations. This wonder-

ful material, which had survived by chance, had to wait for discovery and exploitation until the historiographical climate had changed so as to make someone think it was worth using.

The survival or otherwise of historical source material is undeniably a matter of history itself. The record left us by the past is fragmentary, and the process of selection has not always been arbitrary. But historians have always known this, and have always thought it important to situate the fragments that do remain in the broader context of other remaining fragments, thus gaining some idea of the whole even where significant parts are missing. Doing historical research is rather like doing a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces are not all present in one box but are scattered over the house in several boxes and where, once it is put together, a significant number of the pieces are still missing. The nature of the resulting picture will depend partly on how many boxes you find, and this of course depends partly on having some idea of where to look, but the picture's contours can also be filled in, even when not all the pieces have been located. Of course, we imagine the contours in this situation and have to speculate on a bit of the detail; at the same time, however, the discovery of the existing pieces does set quite severe limits on the operation of our imagination. If they only fit together to produce a picture of a steam engine, for instance, it is no good trying to put them together to make a suburban garden; it simply will not work. The fragmentary nature of the traces left to us by the past is thus no reason for supposing that historians' imagination is entirely unfettered when it comes to reconstructing it.

But this raises the further question of how we translate these traces into a language that we ourselves can understand. Often they are written not only in a different tongue (Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon, or whatever it might be) but also metaphorically, so that the same word used in the seventeenth century as in the twentieth or twenty-first may have a subtly different meaning. "Family" is a case in point; in the seventeenth century it was liable to include living-in servants, which is no longer true even in the rare households where they still exist. So serious is this problem of source interpretation that one group of German historians has produced a multivolume encyclope-

dia tracing the shifting meanings of such words and concepts (alas, only in German) through the centuries.¹³ But of course, such readings are a matter of interpretation, too. If different historians translate historical sources from the historical language in which they are written in two different ways, how do we know which translation is "correct"? How can we convey to today's readers the meanings such words had for historical contemporaries? Are these meaningful questions anyway? Some have argued that they are not, that there is in effect no means of deciding between one translation and another, no means therefore of accurately reconstructing the past meanings of language and therefore the past to which it refers.¹³ But of course, it is possible to reconstruct the meanings which past language had for those who used it because the individual words and concepts we come across in it were part of a system of meaning, so their meaning can be pinned down in terms of the other words and concepts used in the system. We do not read just a single document from, say, Tudor England, but hundreds, even thousands of documents in the course of a single research project, and by seeing the same words and concepts used in conjunction with many others, we can eventually isolate their meaning in terms of the overall linguistic and conceptual system being employed.

As a historian who works not only on a very different society from our own but also one which used an entirely different language—German—I have of course been faced by a double challenge in this respect. Yet I do not think it has been insurmountable, not least because many of the sources I have used—civil service minutes from the Justice Ministry in Berlin, for example, or surveillance reports from the police files in Hamburg—employ a stereotyped and repetitive language in which the same words and concepts appear all the time. In many ways indeed these sources are linguistically impoverished compared with the writings of the great poets and philosophers of the day. The kind of translation work the historian does is rather different from that carried out by someone who is translating Heinrich Heine or Immanuel Kant. What the historian is usually concerned with is language and thought at a fairly basic level, unless of course the subject is the history of poetry or philosophy.

Relatively few historical controversies turn on the meanings of specific words or concepts of even documents. Insofar as they involve disagreements about the interpretation of source material at all, they tend, rather, to center on disputes as to what sources are relevant rather than what the sources actually mean. Moreover, it is perfectly possible for one source to have only one permissible interpretation in itself if two historians are asking the same question of it and therefore to conclude that if the two historians disagree as to what that interpretation is, one historian's reading is true and the other's is false. The fact that this is not always the case does not mean that the possibilities of "translation" are necessarily and inevitably open or infinite. The fact that there are historical controversies, moreover, does not mean that there are no definitely ascertainable historical facts. There are, after all, thousands of historical facts which are undisputed and which are not the subject of historical controversy.¹⁴

These points cast a somewhat negative light on the argument, originally put forward by R. G. Collingwood and subsequently elaborated by E. H. Carr, that all history is the history of thought because ultimately, as Carr put it, "no document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought." When we read a source, he claimed, we reenact in our minds the thought of the person who wrote it.¹⁵ But this is too limited. Historians are accustomed to elicit meaning from documents by comparing them with other documents, and in this way a document can indeed be made to reveal more than its author thought. The gaps in a document—what it does *not* mention—are often just as interesting as what it contains. A statistic in a document can look quite different from what its author thought when we put it together with other statistics of which the author was unaware. We bring our own thoughts to bear on documents, and these can have a material effect on how the document is read. Many sources are not written at all. Getting inside the head of someone who buried treasure in a grave in the fourth century, or made a newsreel in the twentieth, is far from easy. Collingwood's notion of historical explanation is far too closely tied to the explanation of political events. If we are looking at the causes of the price rise in sixteenth-century Spain, for instance, it does not make much

sense to say that we are reenacting the thoughts of the contemporaries who compiled the sources from which we derive the statistics.⁷ Moreover, as two American historians have pointed out,

Documents cannot be viewed as simple manifestations of a creator's intentions; the social institutions and material practices which were involved in their production played a significant part in shaping what was said and how it was said. The historian's meticulous reading of the evidence may therefore have little in common with what the author intended to say or what the contemporary reader understood to be said.⁸

Historians have to know about these institutions and practices, of course, and must bear this context in mind even while they detach the document from it. Otherwise they run the risk of violating the boundaries of its possible meanings in the service of their own particular interpretation. Still, in the end, the conscious motive or thought of the writer of a document might be quite irrelevant to the purposes for which we wish to use the document, though of course, we always have to take it into account.⁹ What the historian writes, and what the documents say, are two different things, or at least most historians have hitherto supposed them to be. But this distinction, too, as we shall now see, has come under fire from postmodernist critics of historical method.

IV

HOW do we derive historical facts from historical sources? The great Italian historian of the ancient world, Arnaldo Momigliano, once described the foundations of modern historical scholarship in the following terms: "The whole modern method of historical research is founded on the distinction between original and derivative authorities. By original authorities we mean statements by eye witnesses, or documents and other material remains that are contemporary with the event they attest. By derivative authorities we mean historians and chroniclers who relate and discuss events which they

have not witnessed, but which they have heard of or inferred directly or indirectly from original authorities."¹⁰ This distinction, for which the terms "primary" and "secondary" sources are more commonly used, was introduced above all by German scholars in the nineteenth century. The contrast between their practice of always going to the primary or original sources and that of, say, the Enlightenment historians, who relied heavily, though not exclusively, on chronicles and other secondary or derivative sources, has led many, if not most, historians to date the establishment of the subject on a professional or scientific basis to the nineteenth century and not before. It is this distinction which postmodernist critics of this historical tradition are now radically calling into question.

Perhaps the most far-reaching, comprehensive, and explicit challenge to history as a discipline in this sense has been mounted by the French linguistic theorists Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. As early as 1968 Barthes charged that historians' claim to reconstruct past reality rested on a pretense. History as written by professionals (or for that matter by anyone else) was, he said, "an inscription on the past pretending to be a likeness of it, a parade of signifiers masquerading as a collection of facts." Objectivity was "the product of what might be called the referential illusion." The illusion lay in the fact that the past was only *imagined* to be out there, waiting to be discovered; in practice it was an empty space waiting to be filled by the historian. Verbatim quotations, footnote references, and the like were simply devices designed to produce what Barthes described as the "reality effect," tricking the reader into believing that the historian's unprovable representations of the past were no more than straightforward reporting. Historians' own understanding of what they did remained, as Jacques Derrida noted, stubbornly "logocentric"—that is, they imagined they were rational beings engaged in a process of discovery. But this, too, was an illusion, like all forms of "logocentrism."

Such ideas derived—at some distance, to be sure—from theories originally advanced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who had noted early in the century that the relation of words to their meanings was usually completely arbitrary. The word "dog," for

instance, no more suggested in itself a carnivorous, barking quadruped than *chien* did in French, or *Hund* in German. Saussure argued therefore that words, or what he called signifiers, were defined not by their relation to the things they denoted (the signified) but by their relation to each other (e.g., "dog" as opposed to "cat"). But while Saussure regarded language as a system of differentiation constructed from signs, in which the signifiers were consistently related to one another in a logical way, subsequent theorists such as Jacques Derrida went much further and argued that the relation changed each time the word was uttered. Language was thus an "infinite play of significations." There was no "transcendental signified" which determined meaning in itself. Everything was a mere arrangement of words; everything was "discourse" or "text." Nothing exists, in this view, outside language. Because we apprehend the world through language and nothing else, everything is a text.⁴⁰

Advocates and critics alike are right in thinking that such views have radical implications for both literature and history. They imply that authors can no longer be regarded as having control over the meaning of what they write. In the infinite play of signification that constitutes language, the meaning of a text changes every time it is read. Meaning is put into it by the reader, and all meanings are in principle equally valid. In history, meaning cannot be found in the past; it is merely put there, each time differently, and with equal validity, by different historians. There is no necessary or consistent relation between the text of history and the texts of historians. The texts which survive from the past are as arbitrary in their signification as any other texts, and so, too, are the texts which use them. "If there is nothing outside the text," as Lawrence Stone has remarked, "then history as we have known it collapses altogether, and fact and fiction become indistinguishable from one another."⁴¹ The medievalist Gabrielle Spiegel has noted that "if texts—documents, literary works, whatever—do not transparently reflect reality, but only other texts, then historical study can scarcely be distinguished from literary study, and the 'past' dissolves into literature."⁴² This is not merely an alarmist diagnosis on the part of disciplinary conservatives. Postmodernists themselves have taken a similar view. Patrick Joyce, for example, has

argued that because "the events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations, and the historical discourses that construct them," the idea of the social as something separate from discursivity disappears, and with it social history, too.⁴³ In practice his argument would seem to undermine the enterprise of history as commonly understood on a wider scale still.

For present reality can be felt and experienced by our senses, but the past no longer exists; it is not "real" in the same sense as the world around us in the present is real. It, too, has become a text. Documents are the texts through which we apprehend the past, and there is no reality beyond them except other texts. "Historians," complains the philosopher Hans Kellner, ". . . routinely behave as though their researches were into the past, as though their writings were 'about' it, and as though 'it' were as real as the text which is the object of their labours." This he declares to be "naive realism."⁴⁴ "The reality of the past," Alan Munslow, another postmodernist writer on the theory of history, proclaims, "is the written report, rather than the past as it actually was. . . . The past is not discovered or found. It is created and represented by the historian as a text."⁴⁵ Moreover, in principle historical documents are no different from the writings of historians themselves. The reader, the historian, invests documents and history books alike with meaning; there is no meaning there otherwise. So the distinction between primary and secondary sources is abolished, and with it the principle, enunciated by Momigliano, on which most modern historical scholarship effectively rests goes out of the window, too. The primary and secondary distinction, charges Keith Jenkins, "prioritises the original source, fetishises documents, and distorts the whole working process of making history."⁴⁶ It is therefore time to abandon it.

It follows from this, Jenkins argues, that "when we study history we are not studying the past but what historians have constructed about the past. In that sense," he continues, "whether or not people in the past had the same or different natures to us is not only undecidable but also not at issue. In that sense, the past doesn't enter into it. Our real need is to establish the presuppositions that historians take to the past." It is thus "more constructive," in his view, to "get

into the minds of historians than the minds of the people who lived in the past and who only emerge, strictly speaking, through the minds of historians anyway."⁴⁷ This view echoes that of the Dutch philosopher Frank Ankersmit, who argues that the nature of differences of historical opinion cannot satisfactorily be defined in terms of research; it is rather a matter of style. Differences of opinion between historians are in his view primarily grounded in aesthetics. "Content," he says, "is a derivative of style." What the historian should do therefore is to stop investigating the past and start instead to think about ways in which it figures in the present. "History . . ." he says, should "no longer [be] the reconstruction of what has happened . . . but a continuous playing with the memory of this."⁴⁸ In a similar way, Jenkins says that it is wrong to insist that history students should properly look at history itself rather than what historians have written about it. "If history is interpretation, if history is historians' work(s), then historiography is what the 'proper' study of history is actually about," because history itself is simply a discourse, a "congealed interpretation."⁴⁹ History and historiography are the same thing. "History," as Munslow observes, "is the study not of change over time *per se*, but the study of the information produced by historians as they go about this task."⁵⁰ The point of history is to study historians, not to study the past.

Thus, as commentators have been quick to note, the historian's conventional concern with the past would be replaced in a post-modernist history with a focus on self-reflexivity and on problems of literary construction: How does the historian as author construct his or her text, how is the illusion of authenticity produced, what creates a sense of truthfulness to the facts and of closeness to past reality (or the "truth effect")? The implication is that the historian does not in fact capture the past in faithful fashion but rather, like the novelist, only gives the appearance of doing so. In literary theory we do not study the characters and actions Jane Austen wrote about in her novels as if they were something that existed outside her mind; why should we proceed differently with historians and the characters and actions they write about?

Such an approach follows a prominent vein in postmodernist

thinking, in which the secondary rather than the primary becomes paramount; rather than study Shakespeare, it is often argued, we should study what critics have written about him, because one reading of Shakespeare is as good as another, and the text itself has no particular priority above interpretations of it, since all are forms of discourse, and it is wrong to "privilege" one discourse over another. What all this might mean in practice is exemplified in a recent book by the feminist historian Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History*. Purkiss explicitly rejects the idea of even attempting to answer "the empirical questions that preoccupy many of my contemporaries" because of "the impossibility of defining the witch." Her purpose rather is to "tell or retell the rich variety of stories told about witches." The sources are too fragmentary to say with any degree of certainty why people believed in witches. Her interest in the treatment of witches by academic historians who have studied the sources under the illusion that they can say something meaningful or certain about witches is therefore to delineate the role the witch plays in their "academic self-fashioning." She makes no attempt to assess the relative merits of these historians in relation to their empirical accounts and interpretations of the historical phenomenon of witchcraft.

Now of course, in practice, Purkiss actually has "assembled evidence," as she admits, about all these things and, in doing so, is not only carrying out the same procedures she so derides in others, but also carrying them out in the service of an "overall empirical purpose" she elsewhere deplores as a concept. Although she derides historical skepticism about empirical arguments as "masculine" and the very notion of "truth" in "empirical history" as "male," this does not stop her from criticizing the claims of some feminist historians about witchcraft as inherently "improbable," thus arrogating to herself a right of skepticism which she denies to men—a sexist double standard if ever there was one, and an impossible one, too, for if truth were really a masculine concept, then Purkiss could never even begin to claim that anything she said herself was true. Such contradictions aside, however, the important point about her account of witchcraft here is its refusal to make any distinction between historical, fiction-

al, and poetical accounts of witchcraft and its concentration on the portrayal of witches in verse, drama, historical texts, and other forms of secondary literature, rather than on the witches themselves. In Purkiss's books, all these texts, from Shakespeare to Keith Thomas, are treated on an equal basis.³

So in this approach there is no real difference between history and fiction. For Hayden White, researching and writing a history book are much the same as researching and writing a novel. Both are made up of elements of real human experience. Both have to meet the demands of correspondence to that experience and coherence in the way they present it. Both use language as their means of representing reality. Just like novelists, historians, says White, prefigure their field of inquiry by applying to the selection and evaluation of the evidence the linguistic and imaginative tools that are also to be used in the construction of the resulting narrative.⁴ There is something to be said for White's observation that the great nineteenth-century historians whose work he analyzed in his first major book, *Metahistory*—Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt—had a great deal in common with their contemporaries among the novelists, like Flaubert, though given the dominance of literary realism in the novels of the day, this was hardly surprising. But White goes on to argue that the literary and linguistic forms by which different historians and novelists construct their work are all equally valid ways of representing the past.

There is in consequence no single correct view of any event or process, but many correct views, "each requiring its own style of representation. . .," he argues.

When it is a matter of choosing among . . . alternative visions of history, the only grounds for preferring one over another are moral or aesthetic ones. . . . One must face the fact that, when it comes to the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning rather than another. . . . We can tell equally plausible, alternative, and even contradictory stories . . . without violating rules of evidence or critical standards. . . . One can imagine not only one or two but any number of alternative stories of . . . any . . . culturally significant event, all equally plau-

sible and equally authoritative by virtue of their conformity to generally accepted rules of historical construction.

Thus White not only denies the possibility of objective knowledge about the past but also claims that it is pointless to argue about it, since each version forms a closed system of thought which is as valid as any other as a form of historical representation (however it may be judged on other grounds). Fictional narratives do not displace each other if both are written about the same subject. We do not say that one is true and the other false. White and those who follow him say that the same holds good for historical narratives.⁵ "No given set or sequence of real events," White has declared, "is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on." Events can only "be constructed as such" by the historian,⁶ who is bound by the limited possibilities of literary representation to follow one or other of these models in constructing events and to draw on a strictly finite number of metaphors and forms of "emplotment." Such literary models, in other words, constructed the interpretation, rather than the interpretation emerging from the sources and finding a form of literary expression appropriate to the truthfulness of the argument and the material.

In all this theory, historical fact more or less disappears from view. The distinction between primary and secondary source, on which historical research rests, is abolished. Historians become authors like any other, the object of literary criticism and analysis. The boundaries between history and fiction dissolve.⁷ The demarcation line between history and historiography, between historical writing and historical theory is erased. Whatever the opportunities this line of thinking offers history as a discipline, there is no doubting the hostile intent of many of those who have developed it. How far their ideas can stand up to critical scrutiny themselves is the subject of the next chapter.