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Reading Primary Sources

Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann

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Reading Primary Sources

The interpretation of texts from
nineteenth- and twentieth-century
history

**Edited by Miriam Dobson and
Benjamin Ziemann**

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ANJA KRUIKE

1 Understanding history

Hermeneutics and source-criticism in historical scholarship

Philipp Müller

In his private correspondence the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen did not hesitate to call a spade a spade. Reflecting on the achievements of Leopold Ranke who was already considered one of the most important founders of modern historical scholarship Droysen declared: 'Unfortunately . . . because of Ranke and his school we have become lost in what is called source-criticism whose entire feat consists in asking whether a poor devil of an annalist has copied from another.'¹ Because of Ranke's influence Droysen felt he had a hard time convincing his fellow historians that the decisive part in studying history was not the verification but the interpretation of the sources. In his letter he continued: 'It has caused some shaking of heads when I happily contended that the historian's task was understanding or, if one prefers, interpreting.'² By emphasizing the significance of interpretation Droysen did not intend to neglect the merits of critical source-reading. As a matter of fact, his 'Historik', a series of lectures where he explained the scholarly principles of history, includes one of the most detailed accounts of the methods to establish the credibility of historical documents that was ever written. But at the same time, Droysen believed that history had to go beyond the mere collection of true facts about the past and, in his eyes, this was exactly where his predecessors had failed to develop a proper explanation of scholarly procedures. He especially held Ranke responsible for a simplified image of history that did not recognize that one could only gain historical knowledge through interpreting historical records. As far as Droysen was concerned, Ranke's search in the dust of the archives was only the first step to be taken in order to reconstruct the past.³

This picture in which Droysen advances a more sophisticated outlook on history while Ranke personifies the daily drudge of historical research by providing the tools of source-criticism, however, neither does justice to the tradition of classical scholarship and its techniques of textual criticism, nor does it correspond with the actual practice of Ranke's historical writing.⁴ Even if Ranke has often been credited for having invented the critical methods of professional historical research his originality in that respect has been much exaggerated.⁵ What really distinguishes both Ranke and Droysen is their treatment of historical facts as evidence of an object that could only be grasped by a specific mental act which has become known as '*Verstehen*' (understanding). Rather than just representing another technical issue, understanding history took shape in the theory of hermeneutics and became the

core procedure of the historian's work not only in Germany but also in European and North American historiography. In the following chapter, Ranke (1795–1886), Droysen (1808–1884) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), three main proponents of hermeneutics in historical scholarship, will be discussed in order to give a picture of the development of its basic structures in the nineteenth century.⁶ Although their efforts differed considerably, each one of them contributed to the emergence of a modern approach to interpreting historical sources with lasting effects far into the 1960s and beyond.

Humanism and textual criticism

In order to fully appreciate the idea of understanding and its meaning it is first necessary to outline the development of critical source-reading before the nineteenth century. The techniques of historical criticism were imported from other disciplines which developed the need to verify and secure information much earlier than did historiography. Historians of the early modern period were more interested in moral and rhetorical questions than in knowledge of the past for its own sake. Classical philology, biblical criticism and modern jurisprudence, on the other hand, were drawn into a sense of scholarship that forced them to base their knowledge on reliable sources.

The humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries began to consider the established picture of the classical authors of antiquity as distorted. Until then the tradition of the classics had been based on generations of handwritten copies which had altered the texts either because their content did not correspond with the religious and moral beliefs of the copyists or because of mistakes in the process of reproduction. As a consequence, humanists understood antiquity as a lost world that had to be recovered from its remnants. Anything that was thought to belong to the age of the Roman Empire or the Greek city-state (*polis*) was now considered to be worthy of conservation. The humanists started to search for old manuscripts all over Europe in order to retrieve the original form of Latin and Greek texts by comparing different copies to each other. They stressed that it was important to master the old languages as an instrument to differentiate between original sections and later changes.⁷ Although their inquiries were aimed at resurrecting an idealized picture of antiquity which, in itself, was not submitted to historical scrutiny, humanists developed a new sense of tradition that worked its way through to sources without accepting the form and content of the documents they found as given.

Even before these forms of criticism were introduced into the study of history they were adopted in theology. Clerics of the seventeenth century published collections of records and documents concerning the history of the church and began to take an historical interest in Christian traditions. The critical reading of sources led to new conclusions concerning the transmission of the texts of the Bible. For example, in his 'Histoire critique du vieux testament' of 1678 Richard Simon, a French clergyman, identified different layers of language in the Old Testament. He pointed out that the sections which recounted the history of the flight of the people of Israel from Egypt did not show a coherent structure. Arguing that the text

included knowledge on events after Moses' death Simon rejected the traditional view which still took Moses to be the author. He concluded that instead of an original account the Bible contained only a mangled version that was composed long after the events had taken place and was produced by writers from different times and backgrounds.⁸

In addition to philology and theology, textual criticism also made its way into jurisprudence before it came to be regarded as a distinctive feature of historical scholarship. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the status of the traditional corpus of Roman law as a collection of texts that should govern contemporary jurisdiction was challenged. French critics like Guillaume Budé and Jean Bodin were convinced that the original Roman law within the 'Corpus iuris' was buried under medieval glosses and commentaries which had misunderstood the meaning of ancient notions because they had not bothered to study the change of judicial institutions and terms.⁹ Again, the humanist tradition of textual criticism emphasized the significance of primary sources and encouraged systematic vigilance for possible distortion. In order to detect mistakes of tradition, different versions of texts had to be compared to each other, the verisimilitude of the textual content had to be examined and the style and language checked.¹⁰

In Germany, historians adopted the practices of textual criticism in the late eighteenth century. Scholars like Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig Schlözer conceived of history as an immanent process that reflected the course and development of mankind. Academic historical studies increasingly began to define themselves as a scientific discipline that was concerned with true knowledge of the past that could be gained by reconstructing and studying primary sources. Especially at the reform-minded universities of Göttingen and Halle the methods of source-criticism were spelled out in systematic guidelines for historical research and became a cornerstone of academic training.¹¹ As a consequence, professional historiography changed its character: rather than simply rewriting the accounts of their predecessors historians were now supposed to produce historical knowledge that was justified by verified information. While philology had used textual criticism to restore the original wording of documents, history used the techniques of restoration of texts to establish reliable knowledge of the past itself.¹²

Therefore, when Ranke famously proclaimed, that he wanted to show history 'as it actually was', basing his historiography on the strict practice of textual criticism, he was not a methodological revolutionary in source-reading.¹³ Rather, he followed an already established path which had been prepared by classical philology, the historians of the late enlightenment and recent historians of antiquity like Barthold Georg Niebuhr.¹⁴ Ranke was familiar with the practices of textual criticism because he was trained as a classical philologist. When he wrote the *Histories of the Romanic and Germanic Peoples* in 1824, he included a critique of renaissance historians in the appendix to his book. He aptly demonstrated that much of the historiography on early modern Europe had been led astray because it relied on traditional authorities instead of primary sources.¹⁵ Although this was considered an astonishing piece of work at the time – and earned Ranke an associate professorship at the University of Berlin in 1825 – his real historiographical achievements lie

elsewhere. For Ranke, source-criticism in itself could not reveal the meaning of history: this could be achieved only when the historian went beyond the collection of true facts about the past. In this respect, Ranke's conception of historical studies relied on a form of understanding which was not taken into consideration by critics like Droysen.

Ranke and the claim to be objective

The historians of the enlightenment had not only transformed history into a discipline that based its claims on empirical evidence, but had also reflected on the connections between the sources and historical knowledge. In this respect, Gatterer and Schlözer developed an approach that has been summarized as 'pragmatic' historiography. They thought that professional historians should comprehend the historical development as an effect that had to be explained by identifying appropriate causes. The course of historical events was supposed to show a system of causal connections that allowed the historian to form an account according to the notion of rational progress.¹⁶ But in the early nineteenth century widespread doubts concerning the ability of the human mind to discover the essence of reality made this conception increasingly unacceptable. Ranke held that subsuming particular facts under a general rule of rational progress did not lead to historical knowledge, but was rather mere philosophical speculation.¹⁷ He agreed with the enlightenment historians that history rested on a unified structure, but insisted that this structure could not be reconstructed by notions of progress and reason. As he explained in one of his lectures in the early 1830s, the historian had to develop a sense that was able to see a whole emerging from the particular elements of past reality without reducing it to formulas of abstract reasoning. The solution Ranke found already contained many of the elements that were later conceptualized by Droysen as '*Verstehen*' (understanding). In Ranke's conception, however, understanding was closely tied to his philosophical, religious and aesthetic convictions.¹⁸

Ranke's outlook on history was originally shaped by philosophical and religious studies during his student years. He was imbued with concerns that arose from his reading of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher (among others), who contributed to the philosophical underpinnings of Idealism and Romanticism.¹⁹ Ranke translated romantic concepts into the epistemology of history and, thereby, combined the empirical techniques of source-reading with an idealist point of view. According to the beliefs diffused by the romantic school, the mundane structures of the human mind were not capable of knowing the core of reality, since reality was thought of as being constituted by the eternal creativity of God. As a consequence, rather than apprehending it in a straightforward manner, the historian could deduce the divine origin of the past only when he established a common thread between historical phenomena. Thus for Ranke particular facts by themselves did not constitute historical knowledge because their hidden nature was only revealed in their relationship to others.

The attempt to find the overall connection between events was meant to provide access to the inner essence of history. In Ranke's opinion, the historian would

decipher the historical truth hidden within sources only when he recognized that facts which appeared to be unconnected were in reality harmoniously connected elements of general spiritual tendencies. He conceived the general content of the past as the work of spiritual forces which could be discovered indirectly by inferring from singular elements of historical reality to their common deeper ground. This conception presupposed the unique mental capacity of the historian. Ranke believed that one could develop mental capacities within oneself which reflected the spiritual essence behind historical events. He declared:

Since the character of all unity is spiritual, it can only be known by spiritual perception. This is based on the correspondence of the rules according to which the observing spirit proceeds, with those rules according to which the perceived object shows itself.²⁰

The concordance between knowing subject (the scholar) and the object to be known (the subject of study) was based on the idea of developing an approach specifically designed for historical studies. In order to discover the meaning of history, Ranke suggested combining the principles of philosophy and poetry. Although he agreed with its aims, Ranke blamed philosophy for constructing abstract categories that ignored the limits of the human mind and, therefore, only pretended to show the spiritual unity of reality. Poetry, on the other hand, was not concerned with the real aspects of life and nature, but adopting its procedures could prove fruitful. Ranke held that a poetic sense of synthesis could integrate the particular facts of the past into a whole that did not represent an abstract notion but a unity of its own kind.²¹ The poetic formation of an image of past reality presupposed a mental creativity within the historian and this corresponded with the hidden spiritual creativity he thought lay within historical phenomena. For Ranke, expressing the particular elements of history in an aesthetic form could reveal the hidden general content of the past because it reflected the spiritual principle of historical reality. Accordingly, science and art did not exclude each other, but were rather constructed as complementary elements of historical knowledge.²² Ranke explained:

One could be inclined to think that the beauty of form is only achievable at the cost of truth. If this was the case the idea of combining science and art would have to be abandoned as wrong. I am convinced of the opposite . . . A free and great form can only arise out of that which has been completely apprehended by the mind.²³

Of course he maintained the emphasis on documentary discrimination of facts and stressed the importance of a critical assessment of historical sources. But for Ranke, the meaning of historical facts could only emerge from what the historian's sense of poetic synthesis had in common with the spiritual essence of reality.

From Ranke's point of view, historical knowledge was thus the result of an interplay between subjective and objective forces. The historian should use his own creative capacities to seek what Ranke designated as the 'ideas' behind events. But

rather than rendering historical knowledge subjective, Ranke asserted that the sense of poetic synthesis was influenced by the spiritual content it was supposed to reconstruct. For him, disclosing the historical ideas behind past events enabled one to develop a sense of the general structure of history. By producing a coherent image of the past the historian would purge himself from the mere subjective elements of his perception and form his mind according to the general truth he was discovering. As Ranke's conviction of the spiritual content of history rested on his belief in the divine origin of reality, he conceived of historical research as a way to harmonize the self and the world as it was created by God.²⁴ 'When we remove the shell from things and turn out what is essential in them, it happens that in our own being, essence, spiritual life, soul and the breath of god take wing.'²⁵ Conceiving history from that point of view led Ranke to believe in the objectivity of historiography. For him, historical knowledge was achieved if the historian transformed his subjective point of view into an objective reverberation of ideas hidden underneath the appearances of historical changes. According to his religious and philosophical convictions he was convinced of the possibility of submerging the subject into the object by the means of historical understanding:

My happiness is to observe the world, past and present, from this point on which I stand, and to absorb it into myself, insofar as it is congruent with me . . . Often one is hardly aware of having a personality any more. One no longer has an ego. The eternal father of all things, who gives life to all, draws us to Him without resistance.²⁶

Ranke's rejection of abstract definitions prevented him from casting his reflections into an elaborated theory of historical knowledge. Apart from occasional statements in essays and letters he developed his practice of source-reading and understanding within his empirical historical writing. Droysen's distorted picture of Ranke as being uniquely concerned with source-criticism can partly be explained by Ranke's reluctance to spell out his theoretical assumptions. But more important than his silence in this respect are the differences between Ranke's and Droysen's historical approaches themselves.

Droysen and the theory of historical understanding

Droysen conceived of academic historiography as having a social task that consisted in forming a subject capable of taking on the responsibilities of a modern citizen.²⁷ He was convinced that the study of history could change the habits of his contemporaries if it was not left to antiquarians who were only concerned with collecting records from a distant past. For Droysen, the sources themselves could not yield historical knowledge; they stood for the past rather than what he conceptualized as history in its full meaning:

Those who consider it to be the highest task of the historian that he does not add anything of his own thinking, but simply lets the facts speak for themselves, do

not see that the facts themselves do not speak except through the words of someone who has seized and understood them.²⁸

Droysen considered sources to be the indispensable basis of history; but in his eyes, they only revealed their significance if they were interpreted by the historian.

Droysen pointed out that historical knowledge had to be based on traces of the past that were still accessible in the contemporary world.²⁹ He proposed classifying these traces according to the character of their relation to the present. In his conception, the term 'remains' (*Überreste*) encompassed all kinds of traces of human actions that had not been intended to make the past known to the future. 'Remains' had been originally part of the daily life of the past without being designed for the purpose of historical tradition. According to Droysen, institutions and works of art, for example, could deliver historical information, but their existence did not depend on the intention of letting people in the future know what had happened in the past. 'Sources' (*Quellen*) in the proper sense, on the contrary, were the result of an effort to constitute historical memory. Any kind of writing on contemporary or recent affairs, from saga to chronicle, originated from the intention of recording events for times to come. 'Sources' in Droysen's usage of the term did not accidentally reflect the past, but already translated it into some kind of a meaningful story that was supposed to be transmitted to future generations.³⁰

In both cases, however, the records required further work:

The result of critical source-reading by itself would not be anything like living reality; the bricks of a building put side by side are only the bricks not the building . . . they are only particular elements which do not give an image of the whole.³¹

Both have their difficulties: 'remains' reflect the purpose for which they were made but reveal nothing about their function and influence within a larger context, while 'sources' – though designed to establish clear meaning – are construed from a specific point of view, one that is entangled in the beliefs and aims of the writer of the past. Only when brought into an interpretative frame-work set up from a retrospective, historical point of view can 'remains' and 'sources' be turned into what Droysen understood to be historical information. He believed that the perspective of the present on the past enabled the historian to overcome the limits of the sources by integrating them into an interpretation of history.³²

According to Droysen, rather than restricting themselves to the literal meaning of the sources, historians should seek to uncover the mental content embodied in the facts and events documented by written texts, monuments and so on. In his conception, history was interested in aspects of reality which had been shaped by the human mind. Historians, therefore, should be concerned with the results of thoughts and plans of the past which had found expression in historical actions.³³ Despite this interest in the way historical actors thought, Droysen distinguished between historical interpretation and psychological interpretation. Whereas the

latter focused on the personal motives of individuals, historical interpretation was concerned with larger historical forces. Understanding actions psychologically meant tracing them back to the character and personality of individuals; historical understanding, as Droysen explained, was based on the belief that the human will depends on the world of which it is part and, therefore, has to be perceived as something beyond the mere outcome of psychological motives. Droysen was convinced that historical epistemology could be based on the existence of a chain of general ideas behind individual thinking, which gave particular thoughts and motives their meaning.³⁴ This concept was the key to the hermeneutic character of Droysen's theory of history and reading sources. Understanding history meant interpreting particular phenomena as part of a whole, a whole that was constructed by the historian in order to determine their historical significance.³⁵

Droysen asked himself whether presupposing a general connection of ideas within history could be methodologically justified. In his eyes, the present had to be perceived as the current result of the historical development of the past. For that reason, he did not accept the charge that the historian's assumption of a general spiritual content behind individual historical phenomena rested on mere subjective imagination. Rather, he argued that the capacities the historian employed to reconstruct the past could not be alien to their subject since they were as much conditioned by the process of history as anything else. Indeed, the idea of a general spiritual development buried within the traces of the past, which historians formed during the process of interpretation, was itself the consequence of historical tradition. 'The historian's question is the result of the entire mental content that we have unconsciously collected within ourselves and transformed into our own subjective world.'³⁶ Since studying history meant using mental capacities which were the result of history, historical knowledge could rely on a tacit connection between the historian's perspective and history itself.

This conception of understanding also affected the aim of historical studies. If historiography was unconsciously shaped by history, historical scholarship was not only the discovery of the past as it 'essentially' had been. It was also an effort to deepen the capacity for historical knowledge by revealing its relation with historical development.³⁷ In this respect, Droysen's endeavour departed significantly from Ranke. Whereas Ranke had proposed reconstructing history according to an eternal divine principle, Droysen wanted to establish an evolutionary principle of history that could make progress possible.³⁸ The historical ideas behind the individual phenomena of the past were for him expressions of 'ethical powers' (*sittliche Mächte*) embodied in the form of language, art, religion, law and the state. While interpreting the records of the past, the historian was supposed to follow their progressive development:

The interpretation of ideas . . . demands . . . one not only to see: this is how the idea of the state, the church, the law etc. has been perceived at a certain point but also: this is how they progressed until then, this is the point they reached within the overall movement of ideas, because only within this continuity they can be understood.³⁹

Whereas Ranke denied the possibility of discerning the spiritual tendency within historical phenomena as a progressive development, for Droysen this was a decisive part of his effort to reveal the hidden relationship between the subject (the scholar) and object of historical knowledge (the topic being studied).

Droysen's determination to study the development of ethical powers was closely tied to what he conceived as the purpose of historical scholarship. If the mind of the present was constituted by the development of historical ideas over time, and if those ideas were by nature progressive, historical knowledge was meant to reveal a wider principle of historical evolution: it was not only significant for knowing the past, but it could also offer orientation within the contemporary world. By revealing the historical nature of one's own thinking, Droysen hoped to give the individual who studied the past a sense of his place in his own time, and to stimulate historical development through the enhancement of social and collective powers. The wider goal of historical inquiry was to make the subject of historical knowledge aware of the historical meaning of his thoughts and ideas, in order to develop a sense of his position and function within a historical continuum stretching into the future.⁴⁰ For Droysen, understanding history meant recognizing that selfhood was constituted by an evolutionary principle of history which – once it was fully grasped – enabled the individual to transcend his current situation in order to carry on the tradition of progress. Historical studies were meant to highlight this continuity as the essence of history, with the purpose of ensuring its further development: 'The idea itself strives to an ever new expression, its existence is to become and to grow . . . Its deployment is the becoming and growing of history, history is the progressing . . . growth of the ideas.'⁴¹ By revealing the presence of the past within the contemporary way of studying history, Droysen thus claimed that the acquisition of historical knowledge was ultimately driven by the same notion of progress as historical development itself. As a consequence, from Droysen's point of view, understanding history was synonymous with eventually fulfilling the task of advancing the cause of mankind.⁴²

For that reason, Droysen severely criticized the proposal of historians like Henry Thomas Buckle who wanted to model historical knowledge on the natural sciences.⁴³ According to Droysen, the general content within particular historical phenomena could not be cast into a law of history that resembled its counterparts in physics or chemistry. Rather than causing the reproduction of a fixed set of occurrences, he conceived general ideas as being constituted by a constant evolution and which, as a result, could not be comprehended as a permanent structure. Droysen believed that understanding history would help the task of revealing both true knowledge of the past and self-knowledge by fusing them within a human science. In that respect, ideas similar to Droysen's were enlarged and systematized by Wilhelm Dilthey.

Dilthey and understanding as the core of the human sciences

Dilthey combined a strongly developed sense for philosophical questions with extensive research on the history of literature, historiography and general intellectual history. His main interest was to develop a scientific foundation for the humanities,

coining the term '*Geisteswissenschaften*' (literally translated as: 'sciences of spirit') with his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* in 1883.⁴⁴ Throughout his work he relied on notions of the German concept of *Bildung* which were already present in the approaches Ranke and Droysen developed. The meaning of *Bildung* is not covered by literal translations like 'education'. Rather than describing a process of acquiring a pre-given catalogue of knowledge or skills, *Bildung* aimed at the combination of knowledge and personal self-formation that was expressed by the notion of understanding.⁴⁵ Accordingly, Ranke did not simply want to establish objective knowledge of the past, but believed that historical studies changed the mental capacities of individuals. Droysen held that history had an educational responsibility which surpassed the discovery of the truth about the past, because it aimed to orient his fellow citizens in the contemporary world. In both of these approaches, gaining historical knowledge was linked with self-formation because it developed the individual's capacity for self-determined thinking and acting. As such, along with neo-humanist intellectuals like Wilhelm von Humboldt, key proponents of German history turned *Bildung* into an ideal conduct of life that was independent from external constraints because it followed an internally motivated concordance with the principles of reality.⁴⁶

Dilthey elaborated on these characteristics of historical studies in a theory of the humanities which was supposed to justify their independent existence as a 'science'. He argued that the natural sciences constructed an object by abstracting from their own perspective, whereas the human sciences focused on the subjective dimensions of the experience of objects. Dilthey thus made a distinction between 'understanding', which was the appropriate method for the human sciences, and 'explanation', a method used in the natural sciences:

We explain nature, but we understand the life of the soul . . . This determines a huge difference in the methods we use when we study . . . history and society from the methods which have led to the knowledge of nature.⁴⁷

For Dilthey, understanding could rely on a mental relationship inherent in the experience of living itself. Whereas the natural sciences approached their objects from the outside, the human sciences focused on the idea that every experience rested on the existence of a mental frame inside the human subject.⁴⁸ Having an experience presupposed a web of beliefs, ideas, sentiments which gave each particular instance of experience its meaning. The method of understanding used this idea in two ways. First, the interpretation of the historical world was itself an experience which relied on the mental frame of the interpreting subject. Second, understanding treated the traces of the past as the 'objectification' of particular experiences of others which were themselves related to an inner mental frame.⁴⁹ The process of understanding was designed to show that the two forms of mental composition were connected.

Dilthey differentiated between different forms of *Verstehen*: elementary understanding read the expressions of mental life backwards from the outcome to its source; re-experiencing, on the other hand, constituted a higher form of understanding. His explanation of re-experiencing relied on a circular form of reasoning: according to Dilthey, any mental experience represented a part of the

psychological whole of a subject. Every particular experience derived its meaning from the overall composition of a mind and, in turn, every instance of experience had significance for the whole. Since the historian had no direct access to the mental composition of those he studied, he had to start by taking his own life-experience as a point of comparison. From there, the meaning of an expression of experience of others could then be inferred by way of analogy. Using one's own ideas, convictions and sentiments as a starting-point, re-experiencing meant reconstructing the web of experience of others by enforcing or weakening the elements of one's own inner being and by critically comparing the other person's expression of mental experience with one's own manner of expressing a supposedly similar experience.⁵⁰ Although this process was not supposed to ever accomplish an actual recreation of another person's mind, Dilthey held that it enabled one to understand the historical traces of the human world.

For Dilthey, the circle of reasoning in understanding and re-experiencing was not a vicious circle one had to get out of. Rather, he argued that the mental origin of historical life should be treated as a part of the tradition which had eventually formed the historian's own contemporary situation including his perspective on other minds. Consequently, as in Ranke's and in Droysen's conceptions, the subject of historical knowledge and inquiry was not to be construed as external or separated from its object of study. Rather, understanding meant recognizing that subject and object were internally connected through history. Understanding particular historical expressions of the soul was supposed to activate the common features of the human mind within oneself. Eventually, this would lead to the comprehension of a general structure of historical continuity which Dilthey summarized as the 'objective spirit'. Because subject and object appertained to the same sphere of human activity (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) within the 'objective spirit', the effort of understanding was already a part of what was to be understood.⁵¹ Dilthey declared:

From this world of objective spirit the self receives sustenance from the earliest childhood, it is the medium in which the understanding of other people and their expressions take place. For everything in which the mind has objectified itself contains something held in common by the I and the Thou.⁵²

Accordingly, the circle of understanding, for Dilthey, constituted the possibility of becoming aware of the interrelationship between the present and the past which determined the meaning of one's own thinking. Instead of trying to recognize the presence of God in one's own soul (as Ranke) or to prove the tradition of historical progress (as Droysen), Dilthey wanted to develop a system of the human sciences in order to show the historicity of the human mind.

Conclusion

Within nineteenth-century history, the notion of *Verstehen* brought together two different attitudes towards history which had long been separated in earlier

historiographical traditions. Antiquarians had been concerned with collecting remnants of past times, while philosophical historians had dealt with the general sense of historical development.⁵³ Around 1800, scholars began to combine the quest for the meaning of history with a need for reliable documents which could back up their arguments. Historians adopted the techniques of textual criticism from other disciplines to base their accounts on verifiable facts, and they developed new ways of integrating them into a coherent account of the past.

As a consequence, historiography increasingly had to sustain its claims by documentary research. And at the same time, leading scholars like Ranke and Droysen conceptualized history as the embodiment of spiritual forces beneath the particular historical facts. The spiritual content of history was not concerned with individual psychological motives, but rather with the historical ideas which dominated the thoughts and beliefs of an age. It was the business of historians to find the common mental ground which was taken as the origin of past events, by relying on their capacity to detect connections between the facts as they were documented in the historical record. In the eyes of Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, the historian's endeavour was justified because the subjective mental forms used when constructing historical ideas were themselves determined by the tradition of the past that was under scrutiny. The emphasis on *Verstehen* in the historical thought of the nineteenth century has often been denounced as embodying a naïve theory of empathy which supposed that historians could feel themselves into the past by effacing their own subjectivity. Yet, the aim of historical understanding – as it was conceived by their main proponents – was not mental contemporaneity or self-forgetfulness, but rather to combine the acquisition of factual knowledge with a way of deepening and forming the scholar's selfhood.

Understanding and source-criticism had formed the backbone of historical scholarship in European and North American historiography since the beginning of its academic institutionalization in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ One of the most famous theoretical reflections on the issues involved in interpreting historical documents was presented in the 1930s by Robin G. Collingwood, who developed his concept of re-enacting the thoughts of the past by carefully reviewing his predecessors of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ From the early 1960s onward, however, concerted efforts to transform academic historiography into a historical social science struck a serious blow to the notion of understanding as the core of historical studies. Reform-minded social historians were critical of the way in which the concept of *Verstehen* had prompted generations of scholars to be uniquely concerned with highbrow intellectual history, and had barred them from taking the social contexts of ideas properly into account.

Critics like Arthur Danto, Louis Mink and Hayden White on the other hand insisted that historical studies should be independent of the theoretical efforts advanced in the social sciences and recast 'understanding' as the inescapable narrative dimension of historical accounts.⁵⁶ Even though today only few historians would claim to interpret historical records in the tradition of Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, many of their ideas either survived or have recently been reinvented by historians who adopt and practise anthropological and micro-historical

approaches. The methodological call to reconstruct past events from the perspective of historical actors, and to deduce the meaning of their particular practices from the whole of their culture (rather than assuming a social structure of which contemporaries were not aware) still points back to the concept of combining source-criticism and hermeneutics as it was developed within the historical studies of the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 Johann Gustav Droysen to Wilhelm Arendt, 20 March 1857, in *Briefwechsel*, ed. Rudolf Hübner, vol. 2 1851–1884, Berlin. Leipzig: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1929, p. 442.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 A critical and complete edition of Droysen's *Historik*, his key text on the theory of history, was first published only in 1977. Even then it might be useful to consult the English translation of an earlier version, published as J.G. Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History*, trans. E.B. Andrews, Boston: Ginn, 1897. All quotes in this chapter are from the critical edition: J.G. Droysen, *Historik. Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857). Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857/1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882)*, (ed.) Peter Ley, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, pp. 11f.
- 4 See A. Grafton, *The Footnote. A Curious History*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 73ff.
- 5 Lord Acton called Ranke 'the real originator of the heroic study of records'. Lord Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History', in J.E.E.D. Acton, *Lectures on Modern History*, London and Glasgow: Collins, 1960, p. 22.
- 6 Another important author in the foundation of the hermeneutic tradition was Wilhelm von Humboldt, who inspired especially Droysen. See among others T. Prüfer, 'Wilhelm von Humboldts "Rhetorische Hermeneutik"', in Prüfer and D. Fulda (eds), *Faktenglaube und fiktionales Wissen. Zum Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Kunst in der Moderne*, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1996, pp. 127–166.
- 7 See U. Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung. Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1991, pp. 351–352.
- 8 See in general B. Neveu, 'L'érudition ecclésiastique du XVIIe siècle et la nostalgie de l'Antiquité chrétienne', in his *Érudition et religion aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris: Michel, 1994, pp. 333–363.
- 9 See Muhlack, *Vorgeschichte*, pp. 371–373.
- 10 For a more detailed account of the development of source-criticism as a reaction to the systematic doubt against historical knowledge see M. Völkel, 'Pyrrhonismus' und 'fides historica'. *Die Entwicklung der deutschen Methodologie unter dem Gesichtspunkt der historischen Skepsis*, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1987.
- 11 See H.W. Blanke, *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991, pp. 156–163.
- 12 See U. Muhlack, 'Historie und Philologie', in H.E. Bödecker (ed.), *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, p. 67.
- 13 Ranke says (in the second edition of his book): 'Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beigemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.' L. v. Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, 2nd edn, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1874, p. vii. The English translation is taken from the extract in F. Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*, London: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 55–62.
- 14 On Niebuhr see G. Walter, *Niebuhrs Forschung*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993.

- 15 Comparing different accounts to each other Ranke especially showed that Guicciardini's *History of Italy* of 1508 which had been taken as a reliable source consisted for the most part not only of copies from other authors, but that Guicciardini had also changed and invented historical facts. See Ranke, 'Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber', in Ranke, *Geschichten*, pp. 1–39.
- 16 See T. Prüfer, *Die Bildung der Geschichte. Friedrich Schiller und die Anfänge der modernen Geschichtswissenschaft*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2003, pp. 267ff.
- 17 See L. Krieger, *Ranke. The Meaning of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 15.
- 18 As he declared in one of his letters of the time against his critics: 'That I am supposed to lack philosophical and religious interest is ridiculous since this is just . . . what drove me to historical research.' Ranke to Heinrich Ritter, 6 August 1830, in Ranke, *Das Briefwerk*, Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1949, p. 216.
- 19 See especially C. Hinrichs, *Ranke und die Geschichtstheologie der Goethezeit*, Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1954, pp. 119–120, 146–147; S. Backs, *Dialektisches Denken in Rankes Geschichtsschreibung bis 1854*, Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1985, pp. 43ff.
- 20 L. v. Ranke, 'Idee der Universalhistorie', in Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, ed. V. Dotterweich and W.P. Fuchs, Munich and Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1975, p. 78.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–83.
- 22 See D. Fulda, *Wissenschaft aus Kunst. Die Entstehung der modernen Geschichtsschreibung 1760–1860*, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1996, p. 407; J. Süßmann, *Geschichtsschreibung oder Roman? Zur Konstitutionslogik von Geschichtserzählungen zwischen Schiller und Ranke (1780–1824)*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000, pp. 215f.; P. Müller, 'Wissenspoesie und Historie. Rankes Literaturgeschichte Italiens als Rekonfiguration ästhetischer Geschichtsphilosophie', *German Studies Review* 29 (2006), 1–20.
- 23 L. Ranke, *Französische Geschichte, vornehmlich im sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, 4th edn, vol. 5, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1877, p. 6.
- 24 See W. Hardtwig, 'Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität. Der Historismus in neuer Sicht', *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), 8–12.
- 25 Ranke to Anton Richter, 13 April 1823, in Leopold von Ranke, *Gesamtausgabe des Briefwechsels: vol. 1, 1813–1825*, (eds) U. Muhlack and O. Ramonat, Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2007, p. 337; see Krieger, *Meaning*, p. 10.
- 26 Ranke to Heinrich Ranke, 30 November 1832, in Ranke, *Das Briefwerk*, pp. 252f. In an earlier letter to his brother Ranke stated: 'Real joy is to forget oneself, to give oneself, to become more conscious of oneself in the larger whole'. Ranke to Heinrich Ranke, 20 and 21 November 1828, in *ibid.*, p. 175; see Krieger, *Meaning*, p. 14.
- 27 See H. White, 'Droysen's Historik. Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science', in White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 83–103.
- 28 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 218.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 9f., 67.
- 30 See J.G. Droysen, 'Zur Quellenkritik', in his *Texte zur Geschichtstheorie. Mit ungedruckten Materialien zur 'Historik'*, (ed.) G. Birtsch and J. Rüsen, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972, pp. 60–66; Droysen, *Historik*, pp. 71–100. Droysen established a third category that designated all the traces of the past which expressed the intention of preserving events but, at the same time, had a practical function within the contemporary affairs of their origin. Droysen called them 'monuments', a category that comprised for example legal documents and diplomatic reports.
- 31 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 166.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
- 34 See *ibid.*, pp. 187–194.

- 35 See H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge der philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 6th edn, Tübingen: Mohr, 1990, pp. 216–222.
- 36 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 107. Compare also the later remark: 'I would not be able to think an idea that has not already won expression . . . We have within ourselves all the ideas that are thinkable, since they are thinkable only insofar they have become, as they are the result of history.' *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 37 See J. Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1993, pp. 254–255.
- 38 This side of Droysen's conception of history was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. See Rüsen, *Konfigurationen*, pp. 254–255.
- 39 Droysen, *Historik*, pp. 211–212.
- 40 See White, *Droysen's Historik*, pp. 95–96.
- 41 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 201.
- 42 See *ibid.*, pp. 363–366.
- 43 See the introduction of H.T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 2 vols, London: J.W. Parker, 1857.
- 44 In the following I do not discuss whether different stages in Dilthey's intellectual career should be distinguished. For the purpose of this essay I follow the arguments of R.A. Makreel, *Dilthey. Philosopher of the Human Studies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 7–8.
- 45 See R. Koselleck, 'On the Anthropological and Semantic Structure of Bildung', in Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 170.
- 46 See R. Vierhaus, 'Bildung', in O. Brunner, W. Conze, R. Koselleck (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1972, vol. 1, p. 529.
- 47 W. Dilthey, 'Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie', in Dilthey, *Die geistige Welt. Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens*, Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1924, p. 144.
- 48 See *ibid.*, pp. 140–142.
- 49 See W. Dilthey, 'Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik', in his *Die geistige Welt*, p. 236.
- 50 See W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1927, pp. 214–215.
- 51 See Makreel, *Dilthey*, p. 314–322.
- 52 Dilthey, *Aufbau*, p. 208. Compare C.R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 162.
- 53 See A. Momigliano, 'Ancient History and the Antiquarian', in Momigliano, *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici*, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1955, pp. 67–106.
- 54 For the significance of Ranke's methodology for historians in the USA see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 21–46.
- 55 Collingwood's theory of re-enactment should not be confused with Dilthey's concept of re-experiencing. In opposition to Dilthey Collingwood restricted understanding on the re-enactment of acts of thought which he defined as separate from the overall composition of the mind. It bears some resemblance with Dilthey's definition of a notional expression of life. For Collingwood's judgement on Dilthey see R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. edn, ed. J. van der Dussen, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 171–176.
- 56 See for example White, *Content*.

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2 Reading texts after the linguistic turn

Approaches from literary studies and their implications

Christoph Reinfandt

'Who's afraid of the "linguistic turn"?' the German historian Peter Schöttler asked in 1997, some eight years after his excellent survey of what he perceived to be historians' new interest in the analysis of language and discourse in the 1980s.¹ His answer was that, plainly, many historians still were. Apparently, the discipline's misgivings about the implications of addressing the linguistic and discursive parameters of both history and historiography were not easily dispelled. To this day, the uncertainty and instability going along with a focus on language and discourse is perceived as a threat to the institutional standards and foundations of historiography. History, conceived in this way, seems to lose its factuality and to evaporate into fiction, irrationality or merely discourse itself; any 'grand' or 'master narratives' of modernity are scattered into 'little narratives', and the unity of history itself appears to have been abandoned.² Accordingly, beyond the programmatic but strangely half-hearted 'Defense of History' by writers such as, most prominently, Richard J. Evans,³ constructive engagements with the challenge are few and far between and do not always come from the heart of the profession.⁴

What strikes the outsider such as the present writer with a background in literary studies, literary theory and sociological systems theory as slightly odd, however, is the persistence of the catchphrase 'the linguistic turn' in the context of this particular debate. To be sure, the 'turn' taken by philosophy and other disciplines at the beginning of the twentieth century – identified retrospectively as 'the linguistic turn' by the philosopher Richard Rorty only in 1967 – is of fundamental importance.⁵ But then there has been so much going on since then that the – from the historian's point of view – apparently widely accepted equation linguistic turn = literary theory = postmodernism surely merits closer scrutiny.⁶ This seems particularly necessary in view of the fact that in the fields of literary and cultural studies there has been a proliferation of subsequent 'turns' of all kinds since the 1980s, and this development makes the epithet 'linguistic' surely look old-fashioned and not 'postmodern' at all.⁷

So how does it all hang together? In the present chapter, the broader context of theoretical positions in literary studies will be outlined with an eye to their viability in realms beyond literature, and particularly history. Theory itself will be conceived of as springing from the renegotiations of objectivity that are characteristic

of modernity. From the eighteenth century onwards at the latest, traditional notions of objective truth had to face the emergence of subjectivity as a core ingredient of modern culture. Once truth became potentially subjective and thus relative, all truth claims had to be justified in new ways, and this function was taken over by theory in a specifically modern sense. Ultimately, however, the emergence of modern theory inaugurated an increasing awareness of the pervasiveness of reflexivity in modern culture at large. This fundamental importance of reflexivity was finally acknowledged with the linguistic turn in the early twentieth century, which later fed into the apotheosis of literary theory in the 1980s⁸ marked by its 'postmodern' ambition of taking the decisive step from being a theory of something towards being just 'plain "theory"' – with seemingly unlimited reach in explaining the world in terms of textuality and representation.⁹

The first section will address theories of textual meaning before the linguistic turn. In contrast to the assertion occasionally put forward in primers of literary theory in the English-speaking world that before literary theory there was only the ideology of liberal humanism,¹⁰ earlier theories about 'textual meaning and how to get at it in the case of literature' will be traced. From the eighteenth century onwards, the theory of interpretation called hermeneutics has tried to preserve the ideal of stable and unequivocal ('objective') textual meaning in spite of its increasing awareness of the fact that meaning can only be realized in subjective acts of interpretation. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, the competitive projects of positivism and Marxism tried to establish extra-textual (i.e. social and historical) frames of objectivity from which textual meaning was to be derived. It is against theoretical orientations such as these that the early twentieth century emancipation of literary theory proper positioned itself by taking its inspiration from linguistics.

Accordingly, the second section will begin with a discussion of the internal ideological contradictions of the Anglo-American varieties of formalism ('Practical Criticism', 'New Criticism'), which are, in spite of their a- and transhistorical aspirations and their longevity, seen as transitional movements caught between the old paradigm of liberal humanism on the one hand and the emerging new paradigm of critical theory on the other.¹¹ This emergence of critical theory is then traced from Russian Formalism through Structuralism into Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, with the last two dominating the emerging self-descriptions of late twentieth-century Western culture as 'postmodern' between, say, 1968 and the early 1980s for better or worse. It is the stringency of this twentieth-century success story with its focus on language and textuality that makes the equation linguistic turn = postmodernism so attractive a target for its opponents. However, as the third section will then show, there has been a re-orientation towards history after the heyday of 'theory' in the 1980s, and fruitful ideas for the interpretation of texts from modern history can be drawn from this context. The chapter will accordingly end with an attempt to map the various components of the checklist outlined in the introduction to this volume onto recent theoretical and methodological positions in the fields of literary, cultural and media studies.¹²

Theory before theory

In an influential survey of the history of Western aesthetics, the literary critic M.H. Abrams suggests that approaches to reading texts can be grouped according to how they understand the relation of a text to the world.¹³ Since antiquity, the most widely held assumption is that a work of art imitates reality. Theories with this focus can be classified as 'mimetic theories' (from Greek *mimesis*, meaning 'imitation'), and they are often combined with 'pragmatic theories' focusing on the question as to why and how this imitation of reality should be accomplished and what effects it has (or should have) on an audience. While these theoretical orientations are still very much with us, a radically new orientation emerged at the end of the eighteenth century when 'expressive theories' focused on the mind and genius of the writer as the origin and sole frame of reference for the work. This Romantic emancipation of the work from the constraints of imitation and moral edification led in turn to a new type of 'objective theories' largely concerned with the work as an object in itself which was fully realized in the modernist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and in formalist schools of literary criticism emerging at that time.

Broadly, then, one can distinguish between traditional, 'old-European' positions predicated on notions of objective truth on the one hand and specifically modern positions predicated on subjectivity and reflexivity on the other. While mimetic and pragmatic theories rest on the assumption that meaning and truth are basically residing in the world and function as eternal and objective norms of beauty and moral behaviour, this frame of reference no longer holds for expressive and subjective theories. As specifically modern theories they acknowledge the loss of ontological certainty characteristic of the modern age and try to compensate for this loss through an insistence on the autonomy of art as prefigured in notions of the artist as genius.

For the present purposes of reading texts from modern history the latter positions are obviously crucial, but it is important to note that the outline presented above does not indicate a linear sequence with each new position replacing the preceding one. Instead it is based on a cumulative principle: to this day, the ideal of objective truth has not vanished, although ever since the eighteenth century all truth claims have had to come to terms with the fundamental instability introduced by subjectivity and reflexivity. Accordingly, textual meaning under modern conditions unfolds in a three-dimensional sphere in which objective, subjective and reflexive orientations of meaning are simultaneously present. However, the bias of the rules of reading shifted only slowly from a nostalgic longing for objectivity to an acknowledgement of culturally domesticated forms of subjectivity and finally to a full-blown engagement with the cultural reflexivity induced by – well, not language as the phrase 'the linguistic turn' suggests, but rather, as will be seen later in this chapter, writing, printing and, of late, the electronic media. And the beginning of this trajectory is marked by the emergence of a theory of interpretation which tries to balance the ideal of stable, unified meanings as part of objective truth with the subjective implications of all acts of reading (and writing, for that matter).

The beginnings of hermeneutics (from Greek *hermeneutikos* 'an expert in interpretation') can be traced to the aftermath of the Reformation, which, in its rejection of the monopolizing of the interpretation of scripture by Catholic dogma, posed the problem of how to legitimize the newly democratized readings of the Bible.¹⁴ The basic principle established here was that of the hermeneutic circle, i.e. the assumption that the understanding of parts of the Bible as read by the individual reader is framed by the meaning of the whole and vice versa, while the meaningfulness of the whole can be taken for granted because of its status as 'God's word'. As soon as this idea is applied to texts beyond the realm of Holy Scripture, however, the problem of whether the meaningfulness of the whole (what whole?) can be presupposed surfaces, and it is exacerbated by the problem of historical distance. Generally, this problem is solved in hermeneutics by assuming a continuity of cultural expression since antiquity which creates a link between all texts. As late as 1960 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) suggested in his seminal *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method) that the problem of subjectivity can be overcome by accepting tradition as a normative element which helps to avoid arbitrary subjective readings.¹⁵ Still, the problem of the potential subjectivism of all reading (and writing) acts resurfaced again and again in the hermeneutic tradition, and it found its seminal expression in Wilhelm Dilthey's (1833–1911) project of establishing the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as an alternative to the increasingly successful objectivist paradigm of the natural sciences. In this context, Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884) insisted that when writing history the distinction between (objective) 'source criticism' on the one hand and (inevitably subjective) 'interpretation' on the other must be maintained, while the subjective implications of the latter should be reined in by the overarching continuity of Western civilization.

As opposed to this direct engagement with the cultural dimension of subjectivity, the nineteenth century also saw a redoubled attempt at preserving the unity of an objective world view. In France, the mathematician and philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) laid out the programme for what he called positivism and which ultimately evolved into the discipline of sociology.¹⁶ In keeping with the French connotations of the word positive, this scientific programme for dealing with social problems strictly focused on what is real (as opposed to imagined), useful (as opposed to meaningless), certain (as opposed to uncertain) and constructive (as opposed to destructive). Following the anti-metaphysical tradition of the European enlightenment, positivism restricts itself to the observation and examination of given facts which are then classified in order to find out and establish the unchangeable laws of the world. On these premises, Comte develops his 'Encyclopaedic Law of the Classification of the Sciences' culminating in the historical method of sociology and integrates this into a larger world-historical scheme with clear political implications: Comte envisages a hierarchical model of society in which spiritual authority resides with an elite of sociologists while secular authority resides with bankers and businessmen.

At this point the ideological framing of scientific objectivity under modern conditions becomes obvious: while the observation and examination of facts may be undertaken for its own sake, there is, behind its back, as it were, a larger agenda

resting on a firm belief in the interconnectedness of scientific, economic, and social progress, i.e. the master narrative of modernity. From here it is only a small step to an outright materialistic philosophy of history as introduced by Karl Marx (1818–1883). While in many respects related to positivism, Marxism replaces the emphasis on knowledge as something arrived at through science with a radically new emphasis on a theoretical model of the material basis of a society as manifested in stages and states of its economy.¹⁷ This move provided the basis for the most powerful counter-narrative of modernity. It also made it clear once and for all that under modern conditions everything can be viewed from (at least) two angles, thus preparing the ground for all kinds of fundamentally critical projects in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as, for example, some of the positions subsumed under the heading of 'postmodernism'.

With regard to the reading of texts from modern history, however, this implies that since Comte and Marx there have been two objectivities, as it were. Both positivistic and Marxist approaches to literature, taking a decidedly anti-hermeneutical stance, regard literary texts as social and historical facts which should be explained without drawing upon fuzzy Romantic concepts like 'genius' or 'creative freedom', but nevertheless they part company with regard to their respective evaluations of texts. In the case of positivism, the basic assumption is that society determines the life of the author who in turn determines the shape of the work. This leads to an author-centred approach which searches for traces of biographical facts in the works.¹⁸ In spite of its anti-hermeneutical origins this mode of inquiry is not completely incompatible with the hermeneutical project of finding out what the author really meant, and to this day the combined power of these two positions, plus experiences drawn from everyday life as well as the conventions of school teaching and encyclopaedias, governs the attitude of many a normal reader or novice student of literature in spite of the fact that all kinds of epistemological problems could be identified (What are biographical 'facts'? How do we get at them? What happens to them in the poet's mind?). Similarly, the time-honoured, 'old-European' notion that literature mirrors reality (cf. Abrams's 'mimetic theories') is perpetuated in a fairly naïve way, notwithstanding the Marxist insight that literary texts do not necessarily mirror reality, because they might as well distort it. And finally, the seemingly straightforward analysis of 'objective' textual features turns out to be heavily influenced by subjective interpretive strategies.

Marxist thinkers, on the other hand, address some of these problems by somewhat paradoxically placing literature on the fairly inaccessible level of 'superstructure' (i.e. as part of the ideas and institutions which mediate between material existence of human beings and their consciousness) whilst acknowledging that the material basis of society is laid by its economic structure. According to these thinkers, literature in a class society is an ideological phenomenon caught up in the necessarily wrong or limited consciousness brought forth and controlled by the power structures of capitalism, though it does have, to a certain extent, the potential for transcending these conditions through its limited independence from the restraints of material production. Obviously, this framework offers a more sophisticated account of the social determination of textual meaning than positivism by

acknowledging that there need not be a one-to-one mirroring of reality. At the same time, however, this step opens up texts for alternative readings in the light of the version of modern progress that Marxism envisages. And with the benefit of hindsight one can see from today's vantage point that objectivity under modern conditions seems to be an ideological construct anyway, be it of bourgeois-capitalist persuasion as in positivism or opposed to this as in Marxism.

Theories of textual meaning before the emergence of literary theory, then, were very much preoccupied with staking claims for objectivity by linking textual meaning to something 'objectively' given outside of the text. Within the frameworks of positivism and Marxism, meaning is determined and unequivocally unified by society and history, while their wholesale and largely uncritical adoption of mimetic and pragmatic theories of art and literature manifests the ongoing longing for objectivity which is characteristic of modern culture to this day. The problem is, alas, that the alternative master narratives of modern progress projected by positivism and Marxism themselves undermine their aspiration to perpetuate objectivity, and one can assume that this fundamental relativity contributed massively to the explicitly reflexive turn modern culture took finally at the beginning of the twentieth century.

There was, however, another sphere increasingly claiming its own objectivity, as it were, in the course of the nineteenth century. In the Romantic period, a modern understanding of art and literature as imaginative and autonomous fields of cultural practice established itself. Just like the tradition of hermeneutics, this new aesthetic and literary paradigm tried to acknowledge the fundamental importance of subjectivity in all acts of reading and writing on the one hand and to salvage the possibility of unified meaning as guaranteed by the ideal of objectivity on the other. For all practical artistic purposes, the hermeneutic projection of objectivity into an idealized realm of 'culture' was translated into an emphatic insistence on the unity and totality of works of art (cf. Abrams's 'objective theories'), and at this point hermeneutics feeds into the momentous formation of what has come to be known as the Romantic ideology.¹⁹ As will be seen in the next section, reading practices in the fields of literature and education were heavily influenced by this ideological formation.²⁰ Before the linguistic turn, then, there were at least three objectivities available in modern culture: the master narrative of progress as envisaged in positivism on the one hand, and the two counter-narratives of Marxism and aesthetic autonomy on the other.²¹

The linguistic turn and beyond: modernity coming into its own

Objectivity, this brief survey suggests, became a highly problematic and contested category towards the end of the nineteenth century. Just like many other dimensions of modern culture, it was subject to differentiation, and an important effect of this development can be found in the proliferation of academic disciplines, each successfully negotiating its own highly specialized truth claims and objectivities but finding only limited acceptance beyond its own sphere. Obviously, this fragmentation contributed massively to the overall emergence of reflexivity as a

signature of modern culture in the early twentieth century. Against this background, the emergence of professional standards for the discipline of history in the course of the nineteenth century can be described in terms of the combination of hermeneutical and positivistic procedures outlined above, albeit with a strong bias towards objectivity as the ultimate yardstick of professionalism and defining quality of good practice. To this day, the conviction that 'things really did happen in the past and that historians can often find out what they were' is at the heart of the historical profession, and justly so as long as it goes hand in hand with the new sense of 'acute methodological self-consciousness' recently described by Keith Thomas.²² Or, as another observer puts it:

We did not need postmodernism to tell us that objectivity was always a chimera, that individual historians, their lives, loves and beliefs, are always there, in choice of subject and argument and in the very words they write. History never was just facts; it was always the interpretation of them. Before the historian, the first person who told stories about the past, history didn't exist. Facts existed, and the past, but not history.²³

Here, however, we are obviously back to square one in terms of the nineteenth-century schism between 'source criticism' and interpretation, and the question is: on what grounds can an *objectivity* not only of *evidence and induction*, but ultimately of *interpretation* be established as the defining quality of good practice within the discipline, and how can it accommodate the standards of postmodern epistemology without undermining the foundations of historians' professionalism?

One possible answer may lie in acknowledging the fundamental twentieth century shift from objectivity to reflexivity as a regulative idea of academic practice.²⁴ Interestingly, this shift was addressed earlier in literary studies than in history, presumably because of literature's lack of 'objective' and factual credentials. As the new discipline of literary studies emerged it had to come up with notions of 'literariness' in order to justify its existence, and a turn to language as literature's core ingredient seemed the logical next step, especially as linguistics was also emerging as a new discipline at the same time – and one with strong 'scientific' leanings and aspirations. This step was, however, taken only half-heartedly in the English-speaking world. Beginning with I.A. Richards's (1893–1979) and C.K. Ogden's (1889–1957) attempt at transferring methods of linguistic analysis to the reading of literary texts in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), the emergent approach of 'Practical Criticism' rejected subjectivist and impressionist modes of literary criticism as well as positivistic approaches.²⁵ All non-literary factors (author, context, reality) were relegated to their new status as 'background knowledge', and the literary text was emphatically conceived of as an organic unity in the face of an increasingly fragmented modern reality. Here it becomes obvious that the new objectivity of the approach oscillated precariously between scientific aspirations on the one hand and the ideological underpinnings of the object of study on the other, i.e. an a priori understanding of the literary text as a 'great', 'timeless' and unified work of art.²⁶ Nevertheless, the codification of this new 'intrinsic approach'

with its exclusive emphasis on 'close reading' under the banner of the 'New Criticism' in the United States of the 1940s established a new focus on the literary text itself as the sole origin of its meaning. And what is more, the truth-value of poetic language with its connotative and metaphorical levels of meaning and its toleration of ambiguity was for the first time explicitly emancipated from the understanding of truth in 'normal' (and scientific) language with its one-to-one denotations of the most literal and limited meaning of a word and its seemingly clear-cut reference to the world.²⁷ Accordingly, time-honoured notions of linguistic truth as rooted in language's correspondence to reality were supplemented by the notion that truth might equally reside in the coherence and acceptability of works of art or, by extension, language, texts or discourses in general. While this idea was at first exclusively limited to literature, the twentieth century saw its gradual expansion and, inversely, an erosion of referential, ontological notions of truth.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, an emerging group of Russian formalists was less encumbered by ideological burdens.²⁸ In Moscow and St Petersburg, a number of scholars tried to get rid of the unsystematic, subjective and impressionistic ways of dealing with literature inherited from the nineteenth century by focusing on 'how' instead of 'what' a text means. Just like the New Criticism, the first steps in this direction were heavily influenced by the aestheticist and avantgardistic poetic movements of the day with their programmatic insistence on aesthetic autonomy. Focusing on the distinction between 'normal' language based on habitual, automatic responses, mechanical recognition and reference to reality on the one hand, and self-referential poetic language which provokes a new awareness and intensity of perception in the reader on the other, the Russian formalists envisaged a dialectics of automatization and defamiliarization based on concrete acts of reception.²⁹ As opposed to the New Critics' insistence on 'timelessness', this dynamic model introduced the possibility of describing literary history in terms of an evolution of literary forms. Later stages of Russian formalism then moved beyond notions of form by introducing the concept of structure in which textual unity is not achieved by a combination and merging of elements, but rather by their dynamic interaction.³⁰ And finally, this development culminated in the so-called 'Structuralist Manifesto' (1928), which marked the final transformation of Russian formalism into structuralism.³¹ The shift from 'form' (with its firm link to the individual text at hand) to 'structure' (with its greater appreciation of the internal dynamics of texts) marked a decisive step in spelling out the implications of the linguistic turn. While for all practical purposes, structuralist readings of literary texts in the English-speaking world frequently remained strictly within the confines of terminologically upgraded close readings modelled on work by Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss,³² the term structure continuously implied larger contexts in that the meaning of textual elements such as binary oppositions was conceived of as being embedded within larger structures, such as society understood as a structure of structures conditioning each other in no particular hierarchical order.³³

According to such approaches, meaning, then, takes its origin in structures, and the basic patterns of structures are prefigured in language itself. The modern

linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was hugely influential, in particular his examination of binary oppositions. De Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* as transcribed by one of his students and published posthumously in 1916 describes language as a system or structure of elements whose relation to each other is governed by codes. Its most revolutionary and ground-breaking idea is that meaning emerges from these relations and oppositions rather than from a sign's reference to the world.³⁴ In other words: the relationship between the materially graspable side of a linguistic sign, the 'signifier', and its meaning, the 'signified', is governed by conventional aspects internal to the language system and thus arbitrary. Accordingly, meaning is a purely linguistic phenomenon basically independent from reference, though for all practical purposes the assumption of a reference implied by the apparent unity of the sign is of course helpful.

At any rate, this emancipation of meaning from reference and the idea that the principle of codes as binary oppositions could be transferred from the realm of language to the realm of culture at large were put to good use in structuralism's wide coverage of cultural phenomena. This coverage ranged from the analysis of poems to the question of how the aesthetic can be described as a social phenomenon, from investigations of the anthropological significance of distinguishing raw food from cooked food to the workings of narrative and the mythologies of everyday life in popular culture.³⁵ This in turn inaugurated the fully fledged cultural dispersion of the linguistic turn's implications, which were now refashioned in terms of semiotics, i.e. in terms of the systematic study of all factors involved in the production and interpretation of signs or in processes of signification. And it was in this realm that the final steps from structuralism into the much more radical claims of post-structuralism evolved.

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) suggested as early as 1964 that meaning is not dependent on the structure of the language system alone, but also on socially and culturally embedded secondary systems of signification such as politics, science, literature or whatever.³⁶ In the contexts of these secondary systems, every linguistic sign in de Saussure's sense, with its arbitrary but fairly stable denotative relation between signifier and signified, functions in its entirety as a new signifier. The signifieds of this new signifier unfold in a field of connotations particular to a given secondary system, and it surely does make a difference whether you talk about a tree in a linguistics class, in a nature poem, in the contexts of 'green' or conservative politics, or in terms of its economic potential. What is more, the plurality of secondary systems in modern culture suggests that their interaction might actually even create tertiary systems of signification in which signs taken in their entirety from one secondary system may stimulate ever-new connotations in another system which thus shifts into a tertiary position. Accordingly, the process of meaning production (semiosis) cannot be delimited, and the potential signifieds of a given signifier proliferate. It is this basic instability of meaning that is finally and notoriously addressed by the 'postmodern' theories of poststructuralism and deconstruction, and it should by now be clear in the light of the preceding survey that this position is the outcome of the linguistic turn at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is, in other words, not just the spleen of some particularly inventive French

theorists in the 1970s, but rather the eventual surfacing of a broader reflexive turn taken by modern culture at large, marked by a shift from 'old-European' ontology with its concomitant essentialism predicated on identity to an all-pervasive constructivism predicated on difference.³⁷

While structuralism and poststructuralism share the assumption that language is constitutive of human dealings with reality and that the world is a world of arbitrary signs, their understanding of the sign differs significantly. Where structuralism insists on the unity of the sign – *within* which meaning resides with its implied reference to the world – poststructuralism acknowledges that only the material dimension of the sign (the signifier) is accessible while its possible signifieds evolve unfixably from never-ending processes of semiosis. Accordingly, there is, in principle, a gap rather than a link between signifier and signified, the sign is not a unit, but rather an access point to a cultural practice which does not point towards anything beyond itself. As the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) argued, there is no 'transcendental signified' which is somehow present without any discursive mediation and can thus stop the endless play of signifiers.³⁸

In the light of these ideas, the structuralist project of providing a scientific basis for the human sciences by describing the laws and constants of the symbolic activity of the human mind finally had to be abandoned as the poststructuralist insistence on the fundamental openness and instability of meaning undermined the belief in the possibility of final explanations of all kind. Accordingly, Derrida suggested that the Western belief in final explanations is a 'logocentric' illusion brought about by the ontological self-deceptions of a culture grounding its world view on a 'metaphysics of presence', i.e. the idea, based on the primacy of spoken language in Western thought, that reality is represented in language through a direct correspondence between word and referent within an essentially whole thinking subject. Instead, reality is, in the context of Western culture, rather represented in language through writing (*écriture*) and the accumulation of information and ideas enabled by the storage function of written texts. Under these conditions, meaning is subject to what Derrida calls *différance*: it is never given and stable, but rather the effect of a never-ending dynamics of signifiers pointing at each other ('to defer') and mutually defining each other in a structure without a centre ('to differ'). Thus, signs neither mean anything 'in themselves' nor do they refer to anything beyond the ongoing process of *dissémination*.³⁹ Every decoding is also another encoding,⁴⁰ or, as Derrida notoriously put it: 'There is nothing outside of the text.'⁴¹ From a deconstructionist point of view, all readings predicated on 'transcendental signifieds' such as truth or reality are 'weak readings' while only readings which are deconstructing these truths by laying open their linguistic foundations can be considered 'strong'.

Clearly, in the light of these ideas, meaning can no longer be determined, criticized or evaluated by reference to facts or objects in reality, and accordingly the question of what historians are supposed to do indeed becomes pressing. But then, even if we accept that we cannot get at reality as such in its totality and ultimate meaningfulness (and the present writer for one does), this does not necessarily imply that reality does not exist, and even historians' belief in historical truth can

survive the onslaught of deconstruction if one acknowledges that interpretations are all we have. For most if not all practical purposes, however, we will have to distinguish between acceptable ('true') and unacceptable ('false') interpretations, especially in view of the power texts can wield in the world, and here the problem of referentiality cannot be evaded. Historians, for example, will insist that it all depends on evidence: if you get your evidence (sources, facts, events) wrong, your interpretation will turn out to be unacceptable, and this insistence on evidence is indispensable in view of the reality-constituting effects of historical interpretations and, most notoriously, in view of the disturbing implications of relativist positions with regard to the holocaust.⁴² However, a deconstructionist would say, the *meaning* of evidence accrues *exclusively* in the realm of (inter-)textuality made up of source texts with their *implied* reference to things, facts and events; it does not originate in things, facts and events themselves. And to this, a constructivist would add: even if we accept that things, facts and events have no historical meaning in their mere existence, it is nevertheless quite clear that they acquire their status as historical facts if a majority of sources *and* interpretations concurs in positing their existence.

It is this concurrence of sources and interpretations which provides an opening for a puncturing, as it were, of the theoretically impenetrable realm of textuality by referentiality. This opening transforms the implicit but ultimately untenable referentiality of statements about the world into a textually and discursively *constructed* explicit reference. Similarly, deconstruction's revolutionary gesture of demonstrating that all aspirations for reference, origins, totality, identity and truth are ultimately untenable because of the fundamentally unstable and non-referential character of language has to be countered with further questions: How can it be that genuinely unstable systems of signification acquire the power of reality principles nevertheless? Or, to put it differently: How do stable patterns of communication emerge? And why (and how) does culture work? These questions have been addressed by many recent approaches in literary, cultural and media studies in a shift from formalism through the heyday of pure theory towards a new, fully reflexive functionalism on a deconstructive basis, which is perhaps the most obvious sign of modernity having finally come into its own, albeit paradoxically under the label of 'postmodernity'.⁴³

Reading texts after the linguistic turn

The trajectory of approaches to reading in the main strand of literary studies in the twentieth century can be described as a sequence of decentring moves from work to text and beyond into realms of (inter-)textuality and, ultimately, towards an inquiry into the media conditions that restrict and empower cultural practices around texts of all kinds.⁴⁴ Starting with a focus on the literary text as a unified work of art, formalist and structuralist approaches soon shifted their attention to the more general linguistic underpinnings of texts, which in turn fed into notions of an overarching textuality of culture.⁴⁵ The cultural continuity of (inter-)textuality, however, cannot be adequately understood without addressing its indispensable prerequisite in

terms of media conditions, i.e. the dissemination of texts. It is Jacques Derrida's lasting achievement to have put this dimension with all its implications on the theoretical agenda. Under the auspices of writing, language can no longer be seen in terms of the difference between world and representation. Instead, it introduces a new difference between writing and voice which reproduces the difference between reference and sign (which 'transcends' the boundaries of language) within the confines of (written) language. In written language, this difference turns up ('immanently', as it were) as the difference between signifier and signified, from then on constituting its own reality in the realm of (inter-)textuality as described above.⁴⁶ At the same time, it is also clear that writing alone cannot account for the proliferation of this second-order 'reality', and here the specifically modern convergence of cultural differentiation and printing comes into play: the distributional power of printing supplements the storage and accumulation potential provided by writing and inaugurates a cultural dynamics unheard of before and eventually boosted by the even stronger distributional prowess of electronic media and digitalization.⁴⁷

What does this historical sketch entail for the practice of reading texts from modern history in order to write (about) modern history? It suggests, for example, that the mandate of reflexivity first articulated in the linguistic turn and then generalized in 'postmodern' theory and philosophy can be answered by paying attention to shifts in the history of different media with their implications for literacy (with all its ideological ramifications)⁴⁸ and historical semantics.⁴⁹ What affects the practice of reading texts from modern history most crucially, however, is the consequences of media-historical conditions for the availability of the historical record in terms of sources.⁵⁰ In this respect, the deconstructive slant on evidence introduced above can be put to good use. While there is, in principle, an ongoing process of semiosis and dissemination which amounts, ultimately, to a circulation of social energy (as Stephen Greenblatt put it memorably and metaphorically⁵¹), the material access point to these processes is provided by texts, and texts are always produced, circulated and received under social and media-specific conditions of accessibility and availability which in turn govern their availability as historical sources. It should be profitable, therefore, to supplement the venerable and highly successful tradition of historical 'source criticism' with deconstructive and media-historical ideas in order to bridge the unproductive schism between historical criticism on the one hand and literary criticism on the other.⁵² There can be no doubt that there are pragmatic differences between 'speakers' and 'voices' in literary/poetic/fictional texts on the one hand – which are, under modern conditions, often predicated on staging or framing subjectivity and, in the course of modern literary history, increasingly aware of their own textuality and mediality – and non-literary/historical/non-fictional texts on the other, which frequently insist on straightforward, transparent and seemingly objective referentiality. But it is also clear in the light of the preceding theoretical reflections that there is, even for the historian, nothing outside of the text at hand in terms of evidence, as the 'outside' can only be constructed and verified through a concurrence and convergence of sources *and* interpretations. Accordingly, and this is the link between source criticism and deconstructive

approaches, the apparent unity of a text or source can only be taken as a merely superficial and pragmatic one which has to be decentred in critical readings. It is the task of the historian as critic to analyse how a text creates its apparent unity and what historical tensions, rifts and aporias are elided in the process of this particular construction with its media- and genre-related as well as institutional and social constraints and opportunities.⁵³

Basically, then, texts are not so much 'carrying' meaning from a source to a recipient but rather bearing traces of meanings intentionally 'inscribed' as well as medially, socially and institutionally 'framed'. These meanings are then supplemented by all the meanings which are constructed in interpretations by various recipients under similarly complex conditions – and the latter are not at all limited to 'intended' meanings. The interpretation of texts from modern history should therefore be concerned with how the text functions rather than its origins. These functions can be mapped onto the three dimensions of meaning simultaneously present in modern culture, i.e. objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity.⁵⁴ With regard to objective dimensions of meaning, the transformation of implied referentiality into constructed reference as introduced above has to be read against the background of Western traditions of mimesis on the one hand and in terms of the 'reality effect' created by intertextual as well as intermedial relations to existing discourses on the other.⁵⁵ Only in such a concurrence and convergence of discourses and texts can key concepts and binary distinctions, metaphors and modes of emplotment be 'naturalized' as objective representations of the world, and this effect is strongly supported by the implementation of neutral and impersonal modes of presentation. Nevertheless, given Western culture's strong bias towards spoken language with its concomitant tendency to think of writing in terms of transcribing a 'voice', subjective dimensions of meaning can frequently be found in texts, either implicitly in oblique allusions to subjective experience or explicitly through references to the 'speaker', 'narrator', writer or author of a text as well as by hints at its assumed or implied addressee or reader. And finally, reflexive dimensions of meaning can be analysed in terms of a text's acknowledgement, implicit or explicit, of its situational and institutional contexts, of its medial set-up including questions of genre and structure, and of its self-conscious and/or self-confident positioning in a wider historical context.⁵⁶

Reading texts in an academic context after the linguistic turn should critically question both the text under scrutiny and the act of reading itself as instalments in an ongoing process of acting in and making sense of the world. Against the background of the historical overview provided in this chapter, current readings should acknowledge the fact that the materiality of the world can be approached from various angles (such as language, semiosis, textuality, discourse, media conditions or communication) but never reached or, in its meaning(s), fully controlled.⁵⁷ In the end, then, it is important to realize that the theoretical turn taken by the humanities following on from the linguistic turn does not imply allegiance to a fixed body of work or to this or that school or approach. Instead, it requires an awareness of the contingency of one's own and other people's practice of ascribing meaning to texts. Theory in this sense is, first and foremost, a mode of persistent questioning always

in danger of 'tipping over' into a self-confirmatory practice by letting its *provisional* answers 'harden' into dogma. However, oversimplifications of abstract theoretical thought will always find their limits in the resistance of texts with their precarious, complex and contingent relation to material history in its inaccessible totality. And it is this complex interrelation between the human and material dimensions of history in an increasingly mediatized and globalized world that can be addressed through reflexive strategies of reading texts after the linguistic turn.⁵⁸

Notes

- 1 Cf. P. Schöttler, 'Wer hat Angst vor dem "Linguistic Turn"?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift für historische Sozialwissenschaft* 23, 1997, 134–151; idem, 'Historians and Discourse Analysis', *History Workshop Journal* 27, 1989, 37–65. For a more recent overview cf. J.E. Toews, 'Linguistic Turn and Discourse Analysis in History', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001, vol. 13, pp. 8916–8922.
- 2 Cf. K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991 and B. Skordili, 'Little Narratives', in V.E. Taylor and C.E. Winquist (eds), *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 230–232.
- 3 Cf. R.J. Evans, *In Defense of History* [1997], New York/London: Norton, 2000, p. 7f. The debate, of course, is not confined to questions of history, but implicates the foundations of scientific and philosophical truth in general. See, for example, from a philosophical perspective P. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford: Clarendon, 2006, and, from a journalistic perspective, O. Benson and J. Stangroom, *Why Truth Matters*, New York/London: Continuum, 2006.
- 4 Cf., for example, G.M. Spiegel (ed.), *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, New York/London: Routledge, 2005, in which only five out of 13 contributors hold positions in history while the remaining eight have backgrounds in political science, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy and English studies.
- 5 Cf. R. Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- 6 For a programmatic textbook cf. C.G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*. Harlow: Pearson, 2005, and with regard to the tacit linguistic turn=postmodernism equation esp. pp. 33–48.
- 7 A recent survey study in German (D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierung in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2006) identifies no less than seven turns under the general heading of 'Cultural Turns': the interpretive turn, the performative turn, the reflexive or literary turn, the postcolonial turn, the translational turn, the spatial turn, and the iconic turn.
- 8 Cf. J. Hillis Miller, 'Presidential Address 1986: The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base', *PMLA – Publications of the Modern Language Association* 102.3, 1987, 281–291.
- 9 Cf. J. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 1.
- 10 Cf. P. Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 11–32.
- 11 Barry, *Beginning Theory*, pp. 32–36.
- 12 Needless to say, the condensation of this huge field of theorizing about reading and meaning within the confines of just one chapter will necessarily be reductive, but it is to be hoped that these very restrictions will facilitate the emergence of a map, the functional point of which, if it is to serve its purpose of orientation, is its reductiveness.

- 13 Cf. M.H. Abrams, 'Types and Orientations of Critical Theories', in: idem, *Doing Things With Texts*, New York: Norton, 1989, pp. 3–30.
- 14 On the seminal importance of the Reformation for the emergence of modernity cf. Alan Sinfield, 'Protestantism: Questions of Subjectivity and Control', in idem, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, pp. 143–180.
- 15 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York: Seabury, 1975.
- 16 For an extensive overview in English cf. *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Freely Translated and Condensed by Harriet Martineau* [1896], Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000. Available from the McMaster Archive for the History of Economic Thought: <<http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/index.html>> (accessed 10 January, 2008).
- 17 For a concise introduction to Marxist thought cf. Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction* [1980], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 18 Ordered, for example, according to Hippolyte Taine's (1828–93) famous triad *race/milieu/moment* or Wilhelm Scherer's (1841–1886) version *das Erlernte/Ererbte/Erlebte* ('education'/'inheritance'/'experience').
- 19 Cf. J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, who explicitly draws upon Marx's and Engels's *The German Ideology* (1845).
- 20 Cf. A. Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as a Social Practice, 1780–1832*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- 21 It is this affinity between two critical counter-narratives that might explain why (neo-) Marxists succumbed so easily to the charms of aesthetic autonomy, as in Adorno's clinging to the notion of true and authentic art which somehow resists commodification or in Althusser's conviction that art is not among the ideologies (cf. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 66).
- 22 K. Thomas, 'New Ways Revisited: How History's Border's Have Expanded in the Past Forty Years', *Times Literary Supplement* October 13, 2006, 3f., 4.
- 23 S. Tillyard, 'All Our Pasts: The Rise of Popular History', *Times Literary Supplement* October 13, 2006, 7–9, 9.
- 24 On a larger scale this development can be described in terms of a shift from ontological and essentialist conceptions of scientific truth to constructivist conceptions of scientific truth. See, for example, N. Luhmann, 'The Modernity of Science', *New German Critique* 61, 1994, 9–23. Again, it is important to point out that both dimensions were present in modern culture from fairly early on. Cf., for example, Kant's concept of an all-pervasive critique as indicated in the 1781 preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason* ('Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.' Quoted from <<http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/cpr/prefs.html>> P 009n, accessed on Jan. 14, 2008) as opposed to the longing for objectivity underlying his work at large.
- 25 Cf. I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* [1929], London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.
- 26 Cf. Abrams's 'objective theories' and the hermeneutic and Romantic heritage in notions of aesthetic autonomy as well as the larger frame of liberal humanism as indicated in the preceding sections of this chapter.
- 27 Cf. J.C. Ransom, *The New Criticism* [1941], Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979.
- 28 Cf. E.M. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971.
- 29 V. Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in D. Lodge (ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Harlow: Longman, 1988, pp. 15–30.
- 30 I. Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language* [1924], Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981.
- 31 I. Tynianov and R. Jakobson, 'Problems in the Study of Literature and Language' [1928], in Matejka and Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, pp. 79–81.
- 32 R. Jakobson and C. Levi-Strauss, 'Les Chats of Charles Baudelaire' [1962], in R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, The Hague: Mouton, 1981, pp. 447–464.

- 33 For a brief and accessible introduction to Structuralism cf. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, pp. 39–60.
- 34 Cf. F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London: Duckworth, 1983.
- 35 Cf., for example, J. Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* [1936], Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1970; C. Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* [1964], New York: Harper and Row, 1969; R. Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' [1966], *New Literary History* 6, 1975, 237–262 and *Mythologies* [1957], New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- 36 R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* [1964], New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.
- 37 For the philosophy-linguistics-interface in this process and its recent shift towards history and culture cf. M. Currie, *Difference, The New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge, 2004.
- 38 For an accessible and concise introduction to Poststructuralism and Deconstruction cf. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, pp. 61–80. The by now classic introduction in English is J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- 39 Cf. J. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' [1966], in D. Lodge (ed.) *Modern Criticism and Theory*, pp. 107–123 and *Of Grammatology* [1967], Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- 40 The most instructive illustration of this principle is probably the analogy to second language learners who are only allowed a monolingual dictionary for a written exam: every word that they look up is encoded in new words, a certain percentage of which would have to be looked up again etc. ad infinitum.
- 41 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 158.
- 42 See, for example, the assessment in Evans, *In Defense of History*, pp. 106–108, 206–210 and the broad overview in R. Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- 43 Cf. N. Luhmann, 'Why Does Society Describe Itself as Postmodern?', *Cultural Critique* 30, 1995, 171–186.
- 44 For some basic contours see also R. Barthes's influential essay 'From Work to Text' [1971], in J.V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 73–81 (also in R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, pp. 56–64). For a concise overview of the implications of this development in terms of a widened scope beyond literary texts cf. P. Childs, *Texts: Contemporary Cultural Texts and Critical Approaches*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 1–10 and passim.
- 45 Cf. S. Greenblatt's notion of a 'poetics of culture' at the heart of the New Historicism as introduced in S. Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture', in H. Aram Veeseer (ed.), *The New Historicism*, New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 1–14. Interestingly, the earlier Positivism/Marxism-divide resurfaced in the new, textual dispensation of the 1980s in the form of a political alternative between the largely U.S.-based New Historicism and an explicitly left-wing Cultural Materialism in the U.K. as well as in discussions about the relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism.
- 46 Typical literary examples of this transformation are the invention of the individualized, subjective 'speaker' in lyrical poetry in early modern times (in the English context particularly in sonnets by Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Sidney and then, of course, Shakespeare) as well as the invention of an omniscient authorial voice for the emergent genre of the modern novel by Henry Fielding in the 1740s.
- 47 It is probably the shift towards a fully fledged digital society which enables us to see the mediality of the age of print more clearly than ever while we are already on our way into the 'next society' (Peter Drucker) under the auspices of the computer. On the theoretical implications of this shift cf. C. Huck and C. Schinko, 'The Medial Limits of Culture: Culture as Text vs. Text as Culture', in G. Sebald and J. Weyand (eds), *GrenzGänge – BorderCrossings: Kulturtheoretische Perspektiven*, Münster: LIT, 2006, pp. 57–71.

- 48 Cf., for example, B.V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* [1984], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 and 'What's New in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice', *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5.2, 2003, 77–91 as well as, with a stronger historical focus, Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1986.
- 49 Cf. R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- 50 The profession's awareness of this crucial factor is marked by the inclusion of an article addressing this dimension in the *TLS New Ways of History Revisited* issue. Cf. Alex Burghart, 'Web Works', *Times Literary Supplement* October 13, 2006, 16–17.
- 51 S. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- 52 Cf. D.B. Mathewson, 'A Critical Binarism: Source Criticism and Deconstructive Criticism', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98, 2002, 3–28 who argues that the approaches are not antagonistic in a theological context but can rather be taken to mark various stages in a continuing modern/postmodern engagement with the problem of truth under modern conditions.
- 53 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt's influential analysis of the doubling of enabling and restricting functions in culture as summed up in S. Greenblatt, 'Culture', in Lentricchia and McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms*, pp. 225–223.
- 54 On the narratological implications of this threefold frame cf. C. Reinfandt, 'Dimensions of Meaning in Modern Narrative: A Systems-Theoretical Approach to Narratology', in S. Tötösy de Zepetnek and I. Sywenky (eds), *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application*, Edmonton/Siegen: LUMIS publications, 1997, pp. 83–90 and 'A Matter of Perspective: The Social Framing of Narrative Meaning', in B. Reitz and S. Rieuwerts (eds), *Anglistentag 1999 Mainz: Proceedings*, Trier: WVT, 2000, pp. 389–402.
- 55 Cf. R. Barthes, 'The Discourse of History' and 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1989, pp. 127–140, 141–148 and F.R. Ankersmit, *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History: The Dynamics of Historiographical Topology*, Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche, 1989.
- 56 See also the 'Basic Checklist' of 'How to Interpret Primary Sources' in the introduction to the present volume, pp. 5–14.
- 57 On the implications of a shift from the language/text/discourse-paradigm of the main strand of 'postmodern' theory to an alternative paradigm focused on non-foundationalist notions of observation, mediality, and communication cf. N. Luhmann, 'Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing', *New Literary History* 24, 1993, 763–782.
- 58 Cf. a recent German introduction to historiography 'in global perspective' (Markus Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Einführung in globaler Perspektive*, Wien: Böhlau, 2006) as reviewed by Simon Ditchfield, 'Noted Down', *Times Literary Supplement* November 9, 2007, p. 7.

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Part II

Varieties of primary sources and their interpretation