

## SOURCES AND DISCOURSES

### I

BELIEF in the historian's almost unlimited power to shape interpretations of the past derives from the perception in postmodernist theory that a historical text, as the intellectual historian David Harlan has argued, can no longer be regarded as having wholly fixed and unalterable meaning given it by its author. But it is doubtful whether anyone in fact has ever believed that meaning can be fixed in this way. Anyone who has published a book and read the reviews of it will be well aware of the fact that many different interpretations of a text are possible, a number of them—whether motivated by malice, by carelessness, or by simple stupidity on the part of the reviewer—only remotely related to the interpretation intended by the author. An awareness of the multiple meanings of texts and their relative autonomy from the intentions of the author has long been part of the stock-in-trade of the historian. That most traditional branch of historical scholarship, diplomatic history, has been largely built on the analysis of the ambiguities of diplomatic documents—not all of them intentional—and has taken much of its analytical power from its knowledge of the possibility, even likelihood, that a treaty or a protocol can, and often will, be interpreted by different states in different ways. Political historians have always known that a speech by an

individual statesman can often have the opposite effect from that intended, and they have always been aware that a politician may frequently fail to make his meaning clear to his audience and produce in consequence what Harlan describes as the poststructuralist paradigm of an "unruly text spewing out its manifold significations, connotations and implications."<sup>1</sup>

The language of historical documents is never transparent, and historians have always been aware that they cannot simply gaze through it to the historical reality behind. Historians know, historians have always known, that we can see the past only "through a glass, darkly." It did not take the advent of postmodernism to point this out. But what postmodernists have done is to push such familiar arguments about the transparency or opacity of historical texts and sources out to a set of binary opposites and polarized extremes. To an imagined historian believing that the language of texts is a transparent window onto the mind of its author, they oppose the equally unreal picture of a situation in which the author has no relevance to the content of a text at all. Sometimes this polarization of the debate is used as an explicit polemical technique, as in the writings of David Harlan.<sup>2</sup> At other times it has a more theoretical character, but is equally unconvincing for all that. The French theorist Paul Ricoeur argues, for example, that "the reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading . . . the text thus produces a double eclipse of reader and writer."<sup>3</sup> But this is not so. A text is always written for a readership and framed according to the writer's expectations of how the intended readers will take it. Similarly, the reader is always mindful of the purposes of the writer during the act of reading. All this remains true even if a document is read by people for whom it was not intended—people like historians, in fact.

When we read, for example, a diplomatic dispatch from, say, the U.S. secretary of state to the Spanish foreign minister in the 1880s, we bear both reader and writer in mind; it would be foolish to do otherwise. We remain aware of the fact that the Spanish foreign minister may have taken the dispatch to mean something slightly different from what the secretary of state intended, so to understand the

text, we have to know not only other texts of both writer and reader but also the political and diplomatic contexts in which they operated, knowledge which requires the reading of yet further texts. Moreover, we know what happened to Spanish-American relations in the course of the 1890s (they deteriorated until the Spanish-American War of 1898). We cannot help reading the dispatch in the light of this knowledge, whereas it was written not only without the knowledge of these later developments, but also without much idea of what was going to happen in the weeks and months after it was written, although obviously the secretary of state had some idea of what he *hoped* would happen as a result of writing the dispatch. In this sense it would not make much difference if we could by some magic summon both gentlemen before us and grill them in person on what the dispatch actually meant; we would still have to read those other documents to make sense of it and to inform ourselves sufficiently to ask intelligent questions, and even if they were made aware of later developments, too, we still could not wholly rely on the answers they gave, for who can wholly rely on what diplomats and politicians say in any case?

As historians we clearly cannot recover a single, unalterably "true" meaning of the dispatch simply by reading it; on the other hand, we cannot impose any meaning we wish to on such a text either. We are limited by the words it contains, words which are not capable of an infinity of meanings as the postmodernists suggest. Moreover, the limits which the words of the text impose on the possibilities of interpretation are set to a large extent by the author who wrote them. The polarization of the debate by postmodernist theorists is simply unrealistic. The fact is, as Dominick LaCapra sensibly remarks, that historical research and writing are a dialogue between two kinds of significances—the historians' and the documents'. "The historian enters into a 'conversational' exchange with the past and with other inquirers seeking an understanding of it." Historians have to "listen attentively to possibly disconcerting 'voices' of the past and not simply project narcissistic or self-interested demands upon them." Thus in any history book there is in fact a multiplicity of voices, and the historian may also be using several.<sup>4</sup> Something like this can be seen

in Roy Porter's description of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

Gibbon coped with bias by revealing it; by exposing the prejudices of his sources, and presenting, rather than suppressing, the personality of "the historian of the Roman Empire." Impartiality arose not out of a fetishism of facts but from the operations of the mind, from analysis, imagination, wit and a capacity to hold judgment in suspense. Gibbon's "great work" reads like a chorus of voices. The contemporaries speak; Gibbon's sources comment on them; Gibbon adds his glosses, often scolding away in the footnotes; and the reader is invited to listen and participate in the intellectual symposium.<sup>5</sup>

Reading any history book necessarily involves listening to this chorus of different voices sounding through the text.

Postmodernist critics have alleged by contrast that historians adopt an omniscient position, using the language of scholarship to suggest to readers that the knowledge they are conveying is neutral, objective, and derived from a transcendent source rather than linked to the historian's own purposes. Thus they claim to have succeeded in alerting "an unwary public, as well as their peers, to how the different perspectives of historians enter into their books."<sup>6</sup> But have the readers of history books, whether professional or otherwise, always been so "unwary"? It simply isn't the case that readers gullibly swallow everything the historian writes as if it were the absolute truth. Too many commentators, postmodernist and otherwise, seem to harbor an arrogant underestimation of the sophistication and critical discernment of those who read history books. As Roy Porter has remarked, "The reader seems to be a missing person in so much history-writing today, presumably because academic historians have largely lost all sense of writing for a public."<sup>7</sup> This goes *a fortiori* for writers on historiography, who seldom pause to think how their work, or, still more, that of the historians they are writing about, is actually read.

In practice, surely, no reader comes to a history book naively willing to believe everything it says. Postmodernists are right to say that readers bring to history their own presuppositions, their own beliefs

and purposes. The point, however, is that these no more completely shape their reading of the book than do the intentions of the author. Reading is a matter of interaction between reader and writer, in which neither is necessarily or inevitably dominant. Moreover, historians on the whole do not write as if *everything* they say were *absolutely* true. On the contrary, the conventional language of historians has *always* made a specific point of detailing the varying levels of certainty or probability attaching to what they say. It is not just that the words "probably" and "perhaps" occur fairly frequently in historical work; the careful historian in fact deploys a large variety of stylistic devices to indicate the relative strength or weakness of the argument advanced and to indicate how tentative or otherwise are the conclusions reached. When, exceptionally, a historian like A. J. P. Taylor made what he liked to call "snap judgments" and issue statements of seemingly dogmatic finality about complex historical issues, it is clear that these were intended to provoke his readers into thinking about the subject rather than to convince them that he was telling the absolute truth about it.

By making their own preconceptions and purposes explicit, historians have customarily tried to provide readers with the knowledge to read their books against their own intentions if so desired. Moreover, in teaching undergraduates and graduate students alike, university historians' primary aim is to get them to adopt a critical and questioning attitude to the books and articles they read, including their own (otherwise what value would teaching be to a historian, and why do so many historians acknowledge in the prefaces to their own books the crucial contribution of their students in having forced them to rethink or reformulate many of their arguments?). One postmodernist writer, Beverley Southgate, has claimed that the "traditional" model of history as the pursuit of the truth about the past means "that students of history will be taught not so much to question as to conform to existing dogma." Nothing could be further from the reality of the situation; one wonders whether Southgate's colleagues in the History Department at the University of Hertfordshire, where he teaches, would recognize their own teaching techniques in this description; one hopes not.<sup>8</sup>

Historical writing as well as teaching makes a point of conveying the provisional and uncertain nature of interpretation and the need to test it constantly against the source materials used as evidence in its favor. This is why it is important not to confuse what happened with how we find out about it. Patrick Joyce may assert that "the events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations, and the historical discourses that construct them."<sup>9</sup> But this is self-evidently not the case. Discourse does not construct the past itself; the most that it is possible to argue is that it constructs our attempts to represent it. Joyce himself confounded his own theoretical claims in a book published at the same time as his polemic against Lawrence Stone in *Past and Present*. While arguing for a "semiology of the social order" in this work, Joyce also noted that "conceptions of the social order were related to attempts to bring order and decency to the experience of poverty, insecurity and labour."<sup>10</sup> However Joyce interprets the concept of "experience" here, the implication that poverty was materially real is clear enough. He insists indeed on underlining his belief, as expressed in his book, that discourses in the past structured perceptions "only because they articulated the needs and desires of their audiences."<sup>11</sup>

As Joyce's own historical work suggests, the historian's voice is important, but so, too, are the voices of the past which the historian is trying to transmit. It is perfectly true to say, as Keith Jenkins does, that most school and university students learn history almost exclusively through reading secondary work.<sup>12</sup> But this is not really relevant to arguments about the nature of historical knowledge, which relate in the first place to the extent to which it is possible to reconstruct the past from the remains it has left behind—or, in other words, to historical research based on primary sources. It is certainly true that to a large extent we use the same procedures in reading secondary sources as we do in reading primary: We ask who has written the document, and why, and to whom the document is addressed, and why; we check it out for internal consistency and for consistency with other documents relating to the same subject; and if it contains information derived from other sources, we ask where

this information comes from and do our best to check it out, too. But this does not mean the objects of these identical procedures must be identical, any more than the fact that we may use a literary framework of interpretation in understanding the past necessarily means that what we are saying is untrue.<sup>13</sup>

To call the past a "text" is of course to use a metaphor, not to attempt a description.<sup>14</sup> As the French historian Roger Chartier has warned, " 'text' [is] a term too often inappropriately applied to practices (ordinary or ritualized) whose tactics and procedures bear no resemblance to discursive strategies."<sup>15</sup> The past is much more than a mere text, and to attempt to read it as a text is to capture only a small part of its reality. Social and political events are not the same as literary texts. Gabrielle Spiegel has claimed: "No historian, even of positivist stripe, would argue that history is present to us in any but textual form,"<sup>16</sup> and elsewhere she has referred to "the literary nature of all historical documents."<sup>17</sup> But a historical source is not the same as a literary text. It is not necessarily, indeed it is not usually a description of an event or a state of mind or a story. From Mommsen's use of Roman inscriptions through to the Rankeans' analysis of diplomatic documents, or the cliometricians' number crunching of parish records of births, marriages, and deaths to the medievalist's surveys of field systems, buildings, and archaeological remains, historians have long been skilled in dealing with documents that do not directly tell a story themselves or report events even in the most recent past. Moreover, radio and cinema, videotapes and camcorders, computer printouts and records, photocopying, microfilm, electronic databases, the Internet and the World Wide Web all are generating new forms of source material for future historians, even if a large proportion of it gets lost. It is foolish to suppose, as John Vincent does, that because the written word is declining as a form of communication, history is dying, too.<sup>18</sup>

The textual metaphor can easily be unhelpful to the discussion of history, by suggesting that history depends on the analysis and composition of literary texts just as much as literary criticism and scholarship do. Even where the historian's sources are written down, they very often bear little resemblance to any form of literature. They may

be statistical series of corn prices or criminal offenses; they may be lengthy lists of individuals belonging to this or that organization; they may be brief inscriptions or graffiti carved into a Roman wall. The conventional tools of literary analysis are of little use in dealing with such materials. On the other hand, historians do not of course simply take such materials as direct reflections of past reality. Maps can deceive, as Mark Monmonier has pointed out in his entertaining manual *How to Lie with Maps*.<sup>19</sup> So can figures and graphs. Statistical series and lists, like visual materials, were all compiled by human beings with specific purposes in mind, and the methods used to gather serial data in the past were often somewhat haphazard and uncertain. But that is to say no more than that they have to be treated with the customary skepticism with which the historian treats more conventional written sources, and the same kind of source-criticism has to be applied to them as well.

## II

SOME writers have claimed that it is impossible for historians to enable the past to "speak for itself" because if the past were to express itself, it would have to reenact itself.<sup>20</sup> This assertion would seem to depend on the belief that when you or I think we are expressing ourselves in speech or writing, we are not really doing so at all, but producing an arbitrary set of words that has no determinate relationship to ourselves at all. However, even if we develop, perhaps even "reinvent" our identity during our lifetime, and even if we have not one unitary self but an identity that is multifaceted, it is still usually possible to discern some consistency in our utterances over time, and indeed most people, unless they are politicians, go to some trouble to make sure that they do express themselves in a reasonably consistent and noncontradictory way. We do in fact invest our words with meanings which have a real relationship to our own life and our own existence; life would be very difficult for us indeed if we did not manage to do this.

Language and grammar are in fact not completely arbitrary signi-

fiers, but have evolved through contact with the real world in an attempt to name real things. In a similar way, historical discourse or interpretation has also evolved through contact with the real historical world in an attempt to reconstruct it. The difference is that this contact is indirect, because the real historical world has disappeared irrecoverably into the past. It has to be established through a reading of the documentary and other fragments which the real world of the past has left behind. Yet these are not arbitrarily configured discourses either but were themselves created in a much more direct interaction with reality. Language is not in the end purely self-reflective. Experience tells us that it mediates between human consciousness and the world it occupies, as Hayden White himself noted in 1975.<sup>21</sup> If it did not describe and inform us about the past, then we would not be able to know that the past had any real existence at all. Hence admitting the existence of the past as extratextual reality implies recognizing that language can describe things external to itself. Content is not a derivative of style; it is possible to describe the same thing accurately in a number of different styles, just as it is possible to give a full and fair account of, say, Gibbon's argument about the causes of the rise of Christianity without making a misguided attempt to imitate the literary style in which he put it.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, a postmodernist such as Jenkins or Ankersmit would also presumably wish to maintain that he is expressing his own beliefs in a consistent and rational way in what he writes, even if this is not always the case in reality. Now there is no real difference in principle between Jenkins writing something in 1995 in a book which I am reading in 1998 and, say, King Henry VIII of England writing something in a letter in 1532 which I am reading in 1998. Both have written these texts in the past, even if Henry VIII's past is more remote than that of Jenkins's. Both wished to express a meaning or meanings which had a bearing on their own lives in some way. When King Henry writes to Anne Boleyn of "the great affection I have for you,"<sup>23</sup> he does not have to reenact this affection in person in order to express himself, however much he might have wished to, any more than when Jenkins says his "new work is addressed primarily (though obviously not exclusively) to advanced and undergraduate

students and their teachers," he has to gather a group of such people together and start haranguing them in order to give them access to the reality of what he is saying. In other words, if we take Jenkins's book *On "What Is History?"* as a historical text, it is simply not true to say, as he does, that we cannot have access to his meaning because the past, in its incarnation in the Jenkins of 1995, cannot express itself.

The postmodernists are caught in a paradox of their own making here. They want to argue that all texts are essentially the same, that there is no difference, for example, between a primary source and a secondary source, between Henry VIII's letter or Jenkins's book and what someone else has written about either of these documents later on (for example, J. J. Scarisbrick's standard biography of King Henry or my own account of Jenkins's book in the pages which you are now reading). Yet there is a very real difference between what somebody writes and the account someone else gives of it. I would like to think that I have quoted Jenkins fully and fairly in these pages and given an accurate representation of his views. But if any readers wish to check whether in fact this is the case, then surely they are going to go back to the book itself rather than to some third person's account of it. The principle at work here is no different from that operating in the case of Henry VIII's letter and the account of it given in a later biography.

The same kind of contradiction catches Jenkins's attempt to deal with Gabrielle Spiegel's argument that the "dissolution of the materiality of the verbal sign means the dissolution of history."<sup>24</sup> According to Jenkins, history as a discipline never did rest on a verbal sign whose materiality was not dissolved, since all verbal signs are immaterial anyway. But for Jenkins to attack Spiegel's position by calling it the product of "ideology and mystification" is disingenuous, because he himself is on record as saying that *everything* is ideology, which means that his own position must be ideological, too.<sup>25</sup> Why should we therefore accept his invitation to be "suspicious of the motives" of those with whom he disagrees and not be suspicious of his own motives as well? The point here is not merely the failure of postmodernist writers such as Jenkins to engage in

the self-reflectivity they so passionately advocate for others; it is also the manner in which they take an unproven assumption from their own arsenal of beliefs (in this case, the immateriality of the sign) and berate their opponents for advancing arguments which are not based on an acceptance of it. If we believe that signs—words, language, concepts, arguments, books—do bear some relation to material reality, then Spiegel's fears begin to seem a lot more reasonable.

Because the past is constantly generating its own material remains, some have argued, "it can and does constrain those who seek to find out what once took place," even if those remains can never really speak for themselves. In their qualified defense of the historian's belief in past reality and the possibility of reconstructing it, Professors Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob reject the idea that the past can impose its reality on the historian through these remains, and prefer instead to argue that the constraints which they impose on the possible variety of interpretations depend on the existence of "a scholarly community whose principal task is to reconstruct, interpret, and preserve artifacts from the past" and which operates a "complex set of rules" in so doing. But surely the past does impose its reality through the sources in a basic way. At the most elementary level, one cannot simply read into documents words that are not there. Moreover, it is highly dangerous to make objectivity in this sense dependent on the existence of a scholarly community. There was, after all, a scholarly community in Germany in the 1920s which remained in existence, largely unaltered in personnel and ideology, under Hitler's Third Reich; scholars nowadays are generally in agreement that the set of rules it operated in approaching the German past was seriously flawed and delivered an interpretation of history that was highly distorted. If we accept that this was because these rules were themselves faulty, however, we also have to accept that good rules transcend scholarly communities and do not therefore depend on their acceptance by them.<sup>26</sup> Those rules might include very basic precepts, such as not altering documents or not leaving out or suppressing material damaging to one's argument or purpose. Historians are not producing mere fictions because, as the

French historian Roger Chartier has observed, they are dependent on the archives and other real, material traces of the past:

The work of historians in analysing and unmasking forgeries . . . is a paradoxical and ironic way of reasserting the capacity of history to establish true knowledge. Thanks to its unique techniques, the discipline of history is skilled at recognizing fakes for what they are and, by that token, at denouncing forgers. It is by returning to its own deviations and perversions that history demonstrates that the discrete knowledge it produces is inscribed within the order of a confirmable, verifiable knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

In this sense, genuine historical documents do have an integrity of their own; they do indeed "speak for themselves." The constraints that past reality imposes through them on the historian are more than merely negative. That is why, as E. P. Thompson once said, "the historian has got to be listening all the time. . . . If he listens, then the material itself will begin to speak through him."<sup>28</sup>

### III

THESE issues, and others besides, were made painfully concrete in the American historical profession in the 1980s by the so-called Abraham affair. When the young American historian David Abraham's book *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic* was published by Princeton University Press in 1981, many reviewers (including myself) hailed it for its originality, while at the same time finding its structural Marxism rather too schematic. Indeed I thought that its central arguments were at such a high level of abstraction that they could not really be empirically validated at all and that the book was best regarded as a work of political science rather than history, conforming therefore to a set of rules and conventions that were not strictly historical.<sup>29</sup> Other, more specialist reviewers were critical in a very different way. In particular, the conservative and avowedly anti-Marxist American historian Henry Ashby Turner, who had himself worked on the same source material, went on record accusing

Abraham of deliberately inventing and falsifying archival material in order to discredit German capitalism and blame it for the collapse of the Weimar Republic. Appalled at these allegations, Abraham went back to the archives to check his sources and replied to Turner, admitting some minor errors but rejecting the main charges leveled against him.<sup>30</sup>

At this point another American specialist in the history of big business in the Weimar Republic, Gerald Feldman, entered the fray with a further string of accusations. Feldman had originally recommended the book for publication by Princeton University Press, despite numerous errors which he had said should be corrected. But he then discovered that one of his former graduate students, Ulrich Nocken, was checking over every reference and every quotation in Abraham's book. Nocken reported that there were hundreds of egregious mistakes, including the printing of inaccurate paraphrases as if they were direct quotations from the documents, wrongly attributed letters and documents, mistranslations, misconstruals, inventions, and falsifications of the sources. This persuaded Feldman that he had been wrong to assume that because Abraham had been awarded a Ph.D., his scholarly integrity could be trusted. As if to atone for his earlier gullibility in passing the manuscript for publication, Feldman now unleashed a ferocious campaign of denunciation, in which a large number of specialists in modern German history, including myself, were sent circulars exposing the errors in Abraham's work and declaring him unfit to be a member of the scholarly community. Abraham replied with a vigorous self-defense, lobbying the German history community on both sides of the Atlantic in his turn. But in the face of Feldman's campaign, which included denunciatory letters and phone calls to universities considering Abraham for an assistant professorship, this was in the end to no avail. As a result of Feldman's untiring hostility, Abraham was hounded out of the profession and went to law school, where he graduated with distinction and duly reentered university employment, this time as a lawyer rather than as a historian and therefore in a subject which is perhaps more comfortable with the manipulation and tendentious interpretation of evidence than history is.<sup>31</sup>

The affair raised three crucial issues apart from the one of the professional ethics of the participants in the row. First, the relationship between Marxist and non-Marxist views of history. Was Hayden White right to argue that "the Marxist view of history is neither confirmable nor disconfirmable by appeal to 'historical evidence,' for what is at issue between a Marxist and a non-Marxist view of history is the question of precisely what counts as evidence, and what does not?"<sup>32</sup> Was this, as Abraham's defenders maintained, an attempt by anti-Marxists to discredit him for political reasons, by traducing his scholarship without justification? Was a Marxist construal of a document inevitably a misconstrual in the eyes of an anti-Marxist? There was no doubt about Turner's anti-Marxism, and it is relevant to note that he himself was about to publish a large book on *Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* which constituted a massive demolition of the Marxist view that capitalists brought Hitler to power. On the other hand, Turner was on record as respecting those Marxist historians, notably Tim Mason, whose scholarship he held to be sound. Mason himself went into print distancing himself from Abraham and endorsing the importance of historical accuracy in research.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Feldman had been generous in his praise of "good Marxist and neo-Marxist history" and could in no sense be seen as anti-Marxist.<sup>34</sup> The controversy could not therefore be reduced to the status of a political disagreement. It was a disagreement over historical evidence and its uses.

The second issue that it raised was the relationship between fact and interpretation. Abraham's defenders claimed that his mistakes of detail made no difference to his overall interpretation. Indeed, when Abraham himself, having been back to the archives and checked over all his sources again, issued a "corrected" second edition of the book, it was only the quotations, attributions, footnotes, references, and other matters of detail that were corrected; he did not alter or amend one single aspect of his interpretation.<sup>35</sup> The critics of the second edition were able to point out that the citations and much of the evidence no longer supported the argument at a number of points. But in a sense they never had. Abraham's schema of rival agrarian and industrial power blocs in the Weimar Republic was taken straight

from the Greco-French Marxist political theorist Nicos Poulantzas. Abraham, it seems, had merely scoured the archives for "evidence" that would back it up. When combined with Abraham's self-confessedly poor research skills and excessive haste in research, this had led to misreadings that, in more cases than not, supported his argument and in many instances actually went beyond it in the direction of the old agency theory (that capitalists were directly, instead of merely indirectly, supporters of Nazism), a theory which, ironically, he was claiming to transcend.

This leads on to the third point—namely, the importance or otherwise of evidence and the falsifiability of historical interpretations by means of an appeal to it. At one point in his book Abraham cited a major German industrialist as writing in a private letter in the early 1930s that it was desirable "to crystallize the bourgeois right and the Nazi Party into one," a declaration which admirably supported his overall interpretation. But the original document, cited accurately by Feldman, contained the crucial word "not," so that it actually said the reverse of what Abraham said it did and therefore went against his general argument.<sup>36</sup> On innumerable occasions Abraham, Feldman showed, invented evidence by supplying additions or glosses from his research notes as part of actual quotations. Abraham indeed admitted that while in the archives, he had failed to fence off quotes from original documents with quotation marks in his notes, so that he was often unable to distinguish them from his own (often, as it turned out, rather tendentious) summaries of other parts of the same documents. Thus he frequently quoted the latter as if they were the former. The book was so riddled with errors that some of them, as Abraham himself was quick to point out, actually went against the argument he was advancing.<sup>37</sup> But it is hard to quarrel with Feldman's conclusion that the general tendency of the mistakes was "to exaggerate the evil role played by industry, to overdramatize its power and self-assurance, and to make arguments far beyond what the evidence would allow."<sup>38</sup>

Abraham wrote in self-defense that as he carried out his research, there seemed to be "an exemplary fit" between his initial hypotheses and the evidence he found.<sup>39</sup> But every working historian knows



how unlikely that is. The first prerequisite of the serious historical researcher must be the ability to jettison dearly held interpretations in the face of the recalcitrance of the evidence. If a letter from an industrialist says he does not want any crystallization of the bourgeois right and the Nazis, then no amount of theorizing will alter that fact, and there is no way around it. There is nothing mysterious about this; historians are perfectly used to trying out ideas on the evidence and throwing them away when they don't fit. Evidence running counter to the argument cannot be omitted or distorted, but must be explained, even at the cost of amending the argument or abandoning it altogether. Many historians and reviewers have commented on this point. Thus when the British Marxist historian Christopher Hill remarked in the preface to one of his books: "I was advancing a thesis. . . I . . . picked out evidence which seemed to support my case," his critic J. H. Hexter rightly commented: "Far from just looking for evidence that may support his thesis, he [i.e., the historian] needs to look for vulnerabilities in that thesis and to contrive means of testing them. Then, depending on what he finds, he can support the thesis, strengthen its weak points, or modify it to eliminate its weaknesses."<sup>40</sup> It is clear that Abraham had failed to follow this basic procedure in researching and writing his book.

My own view is that while Abraham did not deliberately falsify evidence, he was extremely careless with it, far more so than is permissible in a work of serious historical scholarship, or indeed in any work of history, and that he *subconsciously* molded the evidence gathered in his research notes in order to fit the interpretation he had worked out beforehand. It was not a question of middle-aged "fact fetishists" against youthful champions of "historical imagination," as some of Abraham's partisans implied. Both in his book and in his replies to Feldman, Abraham proved distressingly unable to tell fact from fiction. This was not therefore, as Abraham himself and his supporters such as Peter Novick implied, a methodological dispute between theoretical and empirical historians in which the "objectivists" demonstrated their continuing and, by implication, malign and stultifying grip on the American historical profession.<sup>41</sup> Abraham implied, and his defenders maintained, that any history

book would reveal as many errors as his if it were subjected to the same level of intense, detailed scrutiny. Lawrence Stone, for instance, said:

When you work in the archives you're far from home, you're bored, you're in a hurry, you're scribbling like crazy. You're bound to make mistakes. I don't believe any scholar in the Western world has impeccable footnotes. Archival research is a special case of the general messiness of life.<sup>42</sup>

But this, too, was a debatable point.

Stone should know about "the general messiness of life" in the archives. He was far from being an unimpeachable witness on this issue. When he was Abraham's age, in 1951, his own work had been subjected to a series of devastating and merciless attacks by his Oxford colleagues Hugh Trevor-Roper and J. P. Cooper in the *Economic History Review*, which had shown a similar catalog of gross error to that discovered in Abraham's work. Stone had published an article arguing that English aristocratic landowners in the early seventeenth century were extravagant, financially inept, and declining in economic power. The conclusion was that this hastened the "rise of the gentry," which was regarded by left-wing historians like R. H. Tawney as one of the main causes of the English Civil War. Trevor-Roper, however, pointed out that Stone had confused different generations of aristocrats with the same title, got many, if not most, of his sums wrong, and altogether misunderstood the nature of landownership at the time. In arguing that aristocratic ownership of manors had declined, for instance, Stone took county samples without realizing that aristocrats owned land in many different counties, and would readily sell their holdings in one to build up their estates in another; moreover, manors differed substantially in size, a factor Stone ignored completely, so that his figures showing a decline in the number of manors held by aristocratic landowners in some cases concealed an actual growth in the acreage and quality of land they possessed overall.

Trevor-Roper's critique was described variously as "terrifying,"

"brutal," and "one of the most vitriolic attacks ever made by one historian on another." Stone himself was forced to admit that there were "very serious mistakes" in his article and confessed to his "unscholarly treatment" of much of the evidence.<sup>4</sup> When I was an undergraduate in Oxford, indeed, the dons, snifty as ever about American universities, even Princeton, where Stone had gone to teach, were wont to sneer that he had been forced to seek employment in the United States because his position in Oxford had become untenable as a result of the controversy. Although he in fact subsequently went on to a highly successful career, publishing a series of major (though never less than controversial) works in the process, his mauling at the hands of Trevor-Roper clearly rankled even more than thirty years afterward, and his defense of Abraham, with whom he evidently had a certain fellow-feeling, has to be regarded with suspicion. More to the point, however, was the fact that Stone had recovered from this early *débâcle* and during his later career had exercised a major and undeniably significant influence on the study of early modern English history and, through his perceptive and readable review articles, the study of history in general. To deny Abraham the same chance of making amends, as Feldman ultimately did, was surely wrong.

#### IV

THE Abraham affair was taken up into the debate on postmodernism not least because it touched on the issue which was proving the crucial test of the claim that history was incapable of establishing any real facts about the past. Nazi Germany seemed to postmodernism's critics to be the point at which an end to hyperrelativism was called for. Postmodernists realized this. In replying to critics, Hayden White pointed out (in a footnote to one of the essays in *The Content of the Form*) that the Jewish historian Lucy Dawidowicz had attacked all previous writers on Nazism for misrepresenting, neglecting, or trivializing the "Holocaust," thereby implying that they, too, were writing more in literary than in factual terms and that the Third Reich was no different from any other historical subject in this respect. But

Dawidowicz's book *The Holocaust and the Historians* has rightly been generally viewed as distorted, exaggerated, overpolemical, and grossly inaccurate in its account of the subject. There is in fact a massive, carefully empirical literature on the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Clearly, to regard it as fictional, or unreal, or no nearer to historical reality than, say, the work of the "revisionists" who deny that Auschwitz ever happened at all is simply wrong. Here is an issue where evidence really counts, and can be used to establish the essential facts. Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivializes mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen as either a comedy or a farce. And if this is true of Auschwitz, then it must be true at least to some degree of other past happenings, events, institutions, people as well. What then are the implications of this for postmodernism?

In a conference devoted to this subject, published in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, edited by Saul Friedländer, a number of postmodernists and their critics sought to address this problem. Hayden White in particular retreated from his earlier position in order to defend himself against the accusation that his hyperrelativism gave countenance to the "revisionist" enterprise of "Holocaust denial." He conceded that the facts of the "Holocaust" closed off the possibility of using certain types of "emplotment" to describe it. But in making this concession, he implicitly acknowledged the primacy of past reality in shaping the way historians write about it, thus abandoning his central theoretical tenet. The past turned out not to be completely at the mercy of historical "narrativity" and "emplotment" after all.<sup>4</sup>

White himself summed up his change of position by saying that in his early writings he was more concerned to point out the ways in which historians used literary methods in their work and, in so doing, inevitably imported a "fictive" element into it, because their written style did not simply report what they had found but actually constructed the subject of their writing. In his later work he came to draw a sharper distinction between fiction, on the one hand, and history, on the other. Rather than imagine the object first, then write about it in a manner that was therefore mainly subjective, history

existed only in the action of writing, involving a kind of simultaneous production or identification of the author of the discourse and the referent or thing about which he or she was writing. White made this shift of position in response to the debate on postmodernism and "Holocaust denial," and it seems to me to sum up more realistically than his earlier arguments the way in which historians actually go about their business. Historical imagination, he says, calls for the imagining of "both the real world from which one has launched one's inquiry into the past and the world that comprises one's object of interest."<sup>46</sup> This is a view from which it is hard to dissent.

What does the whole debate add up to in practical terms, then? According to Russell Jacoby, when postmodernists such as White and LaCapra deign to descend from the lofty heights of abstraction to offer concrete criticisms of actual works of history, "what begins as a call for a radical departure in historical thought comes out sounding very familiar: the importance, complexity, and ambiguities of the text are continuously reiterated."<sup>46</sup> This is perhaps taking too negative a view. Even Lawrence Stone admits that the "linguistic turn" has "taught us to examine texts with far more care and caution than we did before, using new-tools to disclose covert beneath overt messages, to decipher the meaning of subtle shifts of grammar and so on."<sup>47</sup> All this is to the good. And if Hayden White has had few direct imitators, his influence has been nonetheless real for being all the more diffuse. It can to some extent be traced in the use by other historians of terms such as "emplotment" and the like, terms originally used by White himself, but more generally it can be seen in a growing awareness on the part of historians of the literary and narrative elements in their own work—research as well as writing—and that surely is no bad thing. Yet most of White's earlier arguments do not stand up. The distinction between primary and secondary sources on the whole has survived the withering theoretical hail rained down upon it by the postmodernists. The past does speak through the sources and is recoverable through them. There is a qualitative difference between documents written in the past, by living people, for their own purposes, and interpretations advanced about the past by historians living at a later date.

Keith Jenkins has argued that historical method does not lead to

historical truth. But in saying this, he confuses theory and method. Historical method is not what he says it is: feminist, neo-Marxist, structuralist, *Annaliste*, Weberian, or whatever.<sup>48</sup> These things are *theories*. Historical *method* is based on the rules of verification laid down by Ranke and elaborated in numerous ways since his time. It is common to all historians working in all these various theoretical modes, as a glance at their heavily footnoted works will easily show. Even major methodological differences, for example, between cliometricians churning quantitative data through their computers, intellectual historians engaged in a close reading of a small number of texts, or medieval historians deciphering archaeological finds still fade into the background in comparison with the shared duty of "getting it right": of copying out and punching in the figures accurately, of verifying the wording and authorship of the text, of reporting the correct location of each find in the dig. It is not true to say that historians are "not too concerned about discrete facts."<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, whatever the criteria for the facts' selection, the vast majority of the historian's efforts are devoted to ascertaining them and establishing them as firmly as possible in the light of the historical sources. Even Jenkins uses footnotes. Footnotes and bibliographical references really are designed to enable the reader to check the sources on which a historian's statement is made and to see whether or not they support it. They are not mere rhetorical devices designed to produce a spurious "reality effect." Postmodernists have claimed that

Although historians often frame their criticisms of colleagues' work in terms of evidence—sources overlooked, misplaced emphasis, inappropriate categorization—such criticisms cannot demonstrate the superiority of one interpretation or story-type over another. These debates over evidence are largely diversionary; they are carried on as if the choice and use of evidence will determine a historian's perspective rather than that the historian's perspective counts as evidence.<sup>50</sup>

This claim is misconceived. As the Abraham controversy—and others, too, such as the famous "storm over the gentry" in the 1950s—

showed, interpretations really can be tested and confirmed or falsified by an appeal to the evidence, and some of the time at least, it really is possible to prove that one side is right and the other is wrong. What counts as evidence is not determined solely by one historian's perspective but is subject to a wide measure of agreement which transcends not only individuals but also communities of scholars. Still, it has undeniably been a frequent cause of dispute, above all, perhaps, when historians have come to deal with the problem of causation, as we shall now see.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# CAUSATION IN HISTORY

### I

IN his book *What Is History?* E. H. Carr famously declared that "the study of history is a study of causes."<sup>1</sup> Historians had to look for a variety of causes of any given event, work out their relationship to one another if there was one, and arrange them in some kind of hierarchy of importance. Causes had to be ordered as well as enumerated. Carr poured scorn on the views of Sir Isaiah Berlin and others who argued, in the style of Cold War attacks on Soviet historical "determinism," that history was governed by chance, accident, and indeterminacy and that individuals were autonomous and endowed with unfettered free will and were thus morally responsible for their own actions. These therefore could be explained only as the outcome of their will and not of some larger impersonal "cause." But in everyday life, Carr noted, not unfairly, people did not proceed on such extreme assumptions. To adduce causes was not to deny moral responsibility; nothing was less true than the dictum that "to understand everything is to excuse everything." Morality and