

# Historical Facts and Historical Fictions

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Is it possible to know the past? Is it possible to tell the truth about »what actually happened«, or are historians, like novelists, the creators of fictions? These are topical questions in the 1990s, though they are questions to which different people offer extremely diverse answers. Some people would describe the present situation as one of epistemological »crisis«. Personally, I am not altogether convinced. If we use the term »crisis« precisely, to refer not to any period of confusion but to a short period of turmoil leading to a major or structural change, then it is still a little too early to see or to say whether we are passing through a crisis or not. We would have to be out of the crisis before we knew that we had been in one. However, the term is so convenient that I shall use it, *faute de mieux*, all the same.

The first point to make is that these topical questions are not new questions. They were being discussed with at least equal excitement and irritation in the age of Pierre Bayle. In order to put late twentieth-century problems »in perspective«, as we historians like to say, and in this way to achieve a certain detachment, I shall begin this lecture by describing the seventeenth-century version of this debate on historical knowledge. The second part of the lecture will return to the present, to the current discussions of history as fact or fiction.

The possibility, the limits and the foundations of historical knowledge have been questioned and debated from at least the time of the ancient Greeks onwards, though more intensely in some periods or at some moments than in others. One such moment was the second century A. D., the age of Lucian, whose *True Story* parodies historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides as well as traveller's tales (Ligota 1982).

Another was the sixteenth century, when the famous Spanish preacher and moralist Antonio de Guevara wrote a fictional biography of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. When he was criticized for inventing historical details, Guevara defended himself by claiming that so far as secular and pagan histories are concerned »we have no certainty that some tell the truth more than

others» (Nelson 1973, 35-6) In similar fashion, the Renaissance magus Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, in his *Vanity of the Sciences*, dismissed history as untrustworthy because it is always biased. Later in the century, Sir Philip Sidney defended poetry against its critics by launching an attack on history, mocking the historian »laden with old mouse-eaten records«, but »for the most part authorising himself on the notable foundations of hearsay« (Sidney 1973, 83).

The age of Pierre Bayle was another moment when the possibility, the limits and the foundations of historical knowledge became a matter of debate, especially though not exclusively in France. The late seventeenth-century »crisis of consciousness« so vividly described sixty years ago by Paul Hazard included a »crisis of historical consciousness« (Hazard 1935; Reill 1975).

Descartes, in a brief but devastating remark in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), had already dismissed historical writings as misleading on account of their grand style (Descartes 1963, 574; cf Pomian 1966). However, the debate over historical knowledge, or as it was known at the time, over historical »pyrrhonism«, was particularly vigorous in the age of Bayle, although it rumbled on well into the eighteenth century into the time of Voltaire or even beyond (Scheele 1930; Borghero 1983. On the term, Kelley 1971, 783). I shall begin by discussing the attack on historical knowledge, the case for the prosecution, and then turn to the defence.

The pyrrhonists had two main arguments. The first was the argument from bias, the second the argument from forgery. »Bias« is a sporting metaphor, derived from the game of bowls, and applied, in seventeenth-century England, to distorted views of politics and religion. The point is to suggest that both our passions and our interests prevent us from seeing beyond our own side – whether this is a church, a nation or a political party. For example, the scholar Gabriel Naudé noted that historians, »with the exception of those who are quite heroic«, never represent things as they are [*ne nous representent jamais les choses pures*], but »bias and mask them according to the image they wish to project [*les inclinent et masquent selon le visage qu'ils leur veulent prendre*] (Naudé 1625, 18).

Again, a little book called »the uncertainty of history« – *Du peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire* – written by a French philosopher, François La Mothe Le Vayer, had much to say about the problem of bias. What would our image of the Punic wars be today, La Mothe asked rhetorically, if we only had access to an account from the point of view of the Carthaginians as well as that of the Romans? How would Caesar's Gallic wars now appear if Vercingetorix had been the one to write his *Commentaries* (La Mothe 1668; cf Comparato 1981)?

Pierre Bayle expressed similar views in a discussion of the problem of bias



occasioned by the publication of a history of Calvinism by an ex-Jesuit, Louis Maimbourg. The same material, he suggested, can be used to write a eulogy or a satire, a panegyric or a pasquinade. For example, a historian like Tacitus would be able to write a life of Louis XIV – in bad faith, of course – in which that monarch would appear in a far from glorious light. Hence Bayle confesses that he hardly ever reads historians to learn what happened in the past, but only to discover »what is said in each nation and in each party«. In other words, what interests him in a particular historian is precisely the prejudice (Bayle 1683, 13-18, 28-9; cf Cantelli 1969).

Again, in a study with an unforgettable title, »On the Charlatanry of the Learned«, *De charlataneria eruditorum*, the German scholar J. B. Mencken emphasised the diversity of judgements on the leading figures of antiquity by the classical historians themselves. »Herodianus finds fault with Alexander, the son of Mammaea; Lampridius praises him. Ammianus Marcellinus and Montanus commend Julian as a paragon of virtue; others censure him as a monster of vice. Dio condemns the deeds of Brutus and Cassius; Plutarch extols them. To Paternulus, Sejanus is a loveable man; to many others, he is odious (Mencken 1717, 128).

Thus Voltaire was not saying anything new but summing up more than a century of debate when he wrote his essay *Historical Pyrrhonism* (1769), which like La Mothe discussed the bias of Roman historians against Carthage. »In order to judge fairly it would be necessary to have access to the archives of Hannibal's family«. Since he was Voltaire, he could not resist expressing the wish that he could also see the memoirs of Caiphas and Pontius Pilate (Voltaire 1769, ch. 17, 54).

The second major argument for the prosecution was even more serious. Historians were charged not only with bias but also with credulity. They were accused of basing their accounts of the past on forged documents and of accepting the existence of characters and events which were pure inventions.

Exposures of forged documents were not uncommon in the Renaissance. The critique of the so-called »Donation of Constantine« by the Roman humanist Lorenzo Valla is only the most famous of a series (Grafton 1990). Indeed, the term »critic« came into use in the late sixteenth century partly to refer to these exposures. However, the seventeenth-century critiques went deeper in the sense of challenging the credibility of more and more texts, including some of the most fundamental in both the classical and christian traditions.

For example, two famous accounts of the Trojan war, from rival points of view, believed to be older than Homer and attributed to Dares the Phrygian and Dictys the Cretan, were dismissed as later forgeries. The so-called »her-

metic« writings attributed to the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus met the same fate. So did the letters of the Greek tyrant Phalaris, the history of Carthage attributed to Sanchoniathon, and even the records of the magistrates and pontiffs of ancient Rome. Among the most powerful arguments employed was the argument from »anachronism« (a new word in the seventeenth century), ranging from the language of the forged documents to references to events about which the supposed authors could not have known.

On the same criteria, parts of the Bible were challenged, notably the Pentateuch, attributed to Moses, yet in which the death of Moses is recounted. So were some texts attributed to the fathers of the Church. Some medieval documents too were called into doubt, including papal decretals, charters issued by the Merovingian kings to Benedictine monasteries, and Icelandic sagas. A French Jesuit named Jean Hardouin, went so far as to claim that the majority of classical texts were forgeries (not to mention fathers of the Church, papal decretals, medieval charters, lives of saints, and so on). Hardouin, who would now be diagnosed as paranoid (after all, he believed in a conspiracy to forge texts), may have been a suitable case for treatment, but he was an extreme example of a general trend, combining the doubts already expressed about many of these documents as well as adding a few of his own (Hardouin 1729; cf La Croze 1708; Lenglet 1735; Scheele 1930, 54-9; Momigliano 1950, Sgard 1987).

The example of Hardouin shows how these specific challenges might have a cumulative effect. No wonder that the word »critical« became a fashionable one for book titles in the later 17th century, or that in 1700 one scholar described his own time as the »age of criticism«. An increasing amount of what had been accepted as true history – the foundation of ancient Rome by Romulus, for example, the lives of certain saints, or the foundation of the French monarchy by Pharamond, was now dismissed as invention, as myth. Did Pharamond exist? Did Romulus exist? Did Aeneas ever go to Italy? Was pagan history reliable? Was anything at all certain in the first four centuries of Roman history (Sartori 1982)?

Following in the footsteps of Descartes and his systematic doubt, some scholars went still further, at least in their thought-experiments. Did Charles V exist? Did Augustus exist? Did the siege of La Rochelle really happen? Was history anything more than a novel?

Given all these doubts, it is scarcely surprising to find that the relation between history and fiction was scrutinized with particular interest at this time. For some historians the distinction was clear, and to describe a colleague as a writer of »romances« [*romans*] was for them a way of rejecting his work. Thus the Scottish clergyman Gilbert Burnet condemned the French historian Varillas



because »his books had too much the air of a romance«, only to be denounced in his turn for exactly the same failing (Burnet 1689, 6). A reviewer in a learned journal dismissed the memoirs of cardinal de Retz as »un ouvrage plus romanesque qu'historique« (Quoted Watts 1980, 55).

Examples of this kind of criticism could be multiplied, but it is more interesting to note the existence of the less conventional view that historians had something to learn from novelists. Thus Louis Maimbourg, whose history of Calvinism provoked Bayle's critique, tried to ensure that his way of writing history would give his readers »le plaisir d'un roman«, while Leibniz wished for »un peu du roman« in historical writings, especially when discussing motives (Leibniz 1903, 225-6). The authors of the so-called »secret histories«, a new genre which proliferated in the late seventeenth century, certainly gave Leibniz what he wanted, from Varillas on the secret history of the house of Medici to Gregorio Leti on papal conclaves or Daniel Defoe on »state intrigues«.

For their part, writers of fiction were moving closer to history. The late seventeenth century saw the rise of the historical novel, in the sense of a novel which is not only set in the past but offers interpretations of historical events. The most famous examples come from the abbé de Saint-Réal, whose *Dom Carlos*, published in 1672, bore the sub-title »nouvelle historique«, a term which soon became fashionable in France (Saint-Réal 1672; Dulong 1921, 337; Hipp 1976, 52-3).

Pierre Bayle, incidentally, enjoyed *Dom Carlos* and other historical novels of the time, like the story of the Danish statesman *Le comte d'Ulfeld*. On the other hand, he disliked the »impudence« of writers who ignored the distinction between history and fiction and published what claimed to be »memoirs« but were actually inventions – *Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*, *Mémoires de M. d'Artagnan* and so on (Woodbridge 1925, Mylne 1965 and Hipp 1976). It was, incidentally, the *Mémoires de M. d'Artagnan* which inspired Alexandre Dumas. The historical fabrications of the late seventeenth century included the memoirs of the Mancini sisters, one of whom was courted by Louis XIV, memoirs sometimes attributed to Saint-Réal, as well as the »political testaments« of both Colbert and Louvois. The fashion was especially strong in France, but it spread to other countries, the obvious English examples being Daniel Defoe's *Memoirs of a Cavalier* and his *Journal of the Plague Year*, complete with official documents and statistics to give it what modern critics would call a stronger »reality effect« (Defoe 1720, 1722).

Why should this kind of fabrication have become fashionable at this time? I should like to suggest that it was the reverse of the medal of historical criticism. The fabricators revealed the same awareness of anachronism as the

critics. The new genre depended for verisimilitude on the very skills which the scholars used to expose forgeries (Cf Grafton 1990).

But why did historical scepticism develop at this particular time? There are a number of possible explanations. The pyrrhonist movement owes something to the systematic doubt of Descartes and his followers (Popkin 1964). The detection of forgeries depended on the progress of philological techniques. As for awareness of bias, it was doubtless stimulated by the religious conflicts of the time, in which each side unmasked the prejudices in the histories of their opponents (Cf Popkin 1964). Bayle, for example, formulated his ideas about bias in reaction to Maimbourg's history of Calvinism, which was published shortly before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, precisely in order to justify the campaign against the French Protestants. Even the »pathological« scepticism of Jean Hardouin may be related to religious conflicts, Catholic versus Protestant and especially Jesuit versus Jansenist, since Jansen and his followers had appealed for support to the writings of St Augustine. For Hardouin »began to scent fraud«, as he put it, in »Augustine and his contemporaries«, before extending his scepticism backwards to classical texts (Hardouin 1729, 10, 156, 159; Sgard 1987, 211-2).

By this time you may well be wondering how it was that historians ever survived the crisis of the late seventeenth century. They had to find an answer to the sceptics or go out of business. They did find an answer, or to be more exact, they found a number of different answers which together permitted what has been called the »rehabilitation« of history (Shklar 1981).

One of responses turned out to be a blind alley. This was the geometrical method, so prestigious in the late seventeenth century. It may be illustrated by two examples. The first is that of Pierre-Daniel Huet, who tried to establish the truth of Christianity on the basis of »axioms« such as the following: »Every historical work is truthful, if it tells what happened in the way in which they are told in many books which are contemporary or more or less contemporary to the events narrated« (Huet 1679, 12). A second example comes from the work of a Scottish theologian, John Craig, an acquaintance and a follower of Isaac Newton, who formulated the rules of historical evidence in the form of axioms and theorems. Unfortunately these axioms and theorems turn out to be rather banal, using the language of mathematics and physics to restate commonplaces, for example the principle that the reliability of sources varies with the distance of the source from the event recorded (Craig 1699).

More productive and more useful was the critique of documents, which had a positive side as well as a negative one. Responding to the Jesuit Papebroch, who had questioned the authenticity of royal charters in early medieval France, the great Benedictine scholar Jean Mabillon produced a treatise, *De re*



*diplomatica*, discussing the methods of dating such documents by the study of their handwriting, their formulae, their seals and so on, showing in this way how forgeries might be detected and the authenticity of other charters vindicated. This was not the first work to discuss medieval charters in this way, but it was by far the most systematic. Mabillon convinced his opponent, as the latter was generous enough to admit, though another Jesuit replied instead, and the controversy continued well into the eighteenth century (Mabillon 1681). There was no single definitive reply to Hardouin as there was to Papebroch, and perhaps there was no need for one, but Jean Le Clerc did produce a useful handbook, the *Ars critica*, which laid out the rules of textual criticism, classical and biblical (Le Clerc 1697).

Another response to the sceptics was to emphasize the relative reliability of the evidence from material culture, notably inscriptions, coins and medals. In this field Hardouin was not a sceptic but an enthusiast, who believed that the only way of establishing a satisfactory chronology of ancient history was to rely on coins rather than ancient writers (Hardouin 1693). Inscriptions, coins and medals could of course be forged, but rules for the detection of such forgeries could be worked out, as they were for example by the Italian scholar Scipione Maffei in his »art of lapidary criticism« (Maffei 1765). The debate with the sceptics had the unintended consequence of encouraging historians to make increasing use of non-literary sources not only for ancient history but for that of the Middle Ages as well (Haskell 1993).

So far as the argument from bias was concerned, there was what might be called a »common-sense« defence against the sceptics. For example, Pierre Bayle, giving back with one hand what he had taken away with the other, suggested that by examining circumstances with care, it was possible to discover calumnies (Bayle 1682). Again, Gilbert Burnet distinguished the »natural« bias of historians who favour their own side from the illegitimate techniques of slanderers like Varillas (Burnet 1689).

However, there was no systematic discussion of this problem (so far as I know), until the middle of the eighteenth century, when a German scholar, J. M. Chladenius, published his reflections on the problem of the »standpoint« (*Standort*) or »viewpoint« (*Sehepunkt*). Chladenius concluded that »We cannot avoid looking at history each from his own point of view, and therefore retelling the story according to that point of view ... to be biassed in the telling cannot be equated with narrating a subject or story from one's point of view, for if that were the case all narrations would be biassed« (Chladenius 1752, 150 ff; cf Reill 1975, Koselleck 1979, 137-40).

Yet another response to the challenge of pyrrhonism was what has been called the »rehabilitation of myth«, associated in particular with Giambattista Vico.

The early eighteenth century was a time when the meaning of Greek and other myths was discussed with renewed interest. Vico was a sceptic in the sense that he considered all accounts of the origins of nations to be uncertain, apart from that of the Jews. In the case of Rome, for example, it was impossible to know what happened before the second Punic War. On the other hand, Vico was an anti-sceptic or a »critic of criticism« in the sense that he believed it possible to read myths between the lines and to use them to write the history of customs and ideas. He read myth as evidence of mentalities, as Bayle had read historians as evidence of prejudice. This was the »new art of criticism« which, according to Vico, was one of the seven aspects of his *New Science* (Vico 1744, 28, 102, 125; cf Burke 1985, 43-8, and Mali 1992, 136-211).

Drawing on these special studies, a number of general refutations of historical pyrrhonism appeared in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, especially in Germany, but also in France, England and the Netherlands (in Spain, despite Renaissance precedents, father Feijóo was the only contributor) (Scheele 1930; Borghero 1983). At Leiden, for example, Jacob Perizonius delivered a lecture on bias in history, distinguishing unreliable writers like Maimbourg and Varillas from trustworthy historians such as Thucydides and Commynes (Perizonius 1702). The key argument against the sceptics, however, was the one about »degrees of assent« put forward by John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. »When any particular matter of fact is vouched by concurrent testimony of unsuspected witnesses, there our consent is ... unavoidable. Thus: that there is such a city in Italy as Rome; that about 1700 years ago there lived in it a man, called Julius Caesar; that he was a general, and that he won a battle against another, called Pompey« (Locke 1690, book 4).

Perhaps the most interesting of the many refutations of Pyrrhonism is that produced by a friend of Leibniz called Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling, professor at the university of Rinteln. Like Locke, Bierling distinguishes levels of certainty or probability in history, three in all, from the maximum (that Julius Caesar existed), via the middle level (the reasons for the abdication of Charles V) to the minimum (the problem of the complicity of Mary Queen of Scots in the murder of her husband, or of Wallenstein's plans in the months before his assassination). The modern examples make his discussion all the more interesting. Bierling's discussion of the obstacles to reaching historical truth makes the point, unusual for his time, that documents are not only to be doubted because they may be forged, but also because they may be biased, like the judicial records of seventeenth-century witch-trials. However, historians can use documents without believing everything they contain (Bierling 1724. On him, Scheele 1930).



By the middle of the eighteenth century, at the latest, one may say that the crisis of historical consciousness was resolved. Voltaire's contribution to the debate came rather too late to be useful. For the sceptics had been useful in forcing historians to look at their sources more critically and to distinguish different degrees of probability. There followed a long period in which many of the best historians combined what might be called an acute sense of »local scepticism« about particular sources, with a general confidence in their ability to reach what the English scholar John Selden once called »the sanctuary of truth«. Even the sceptic David Hume laid his scepticism aside when he moved from philosophy to history. The boundary between history and fiction, once open, gradually closed. Leopold von Ranke engaged in one kind of writing about the past, Sir Walter Scott about the other.

Today, however, as you well know, the crisis of historical consciousness has returned (despite previous reservations, I use the term out of convenience). Curiously enough, it takes many of the same forms as it did in the late seventeenth century, although the leading participants in the debate appear to be unaware of these parallels. The new philosophers, notably Jean-François Lyotard, undermine the foundations of contemporary historical narrative, just as Descartes had once undermined the narratives of humanist historians (Lyotard 1979). Historians debate whether key documents like the Hitler diaries are genuine or forged. Some of them go so far as to deny the existence of major historical events such as the Holocaust. To the discomfort of librarians, but not only of librarians, the boundary between history and fiction has opened up once more.

Let me remind you of a few well-known recent examples of the transgression of that boundary, as it used to be defined. Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* claims »to use the texture and devices of a novel to tell a true story« (Keneally 1982). Mario Vargas Llosa has imagined a historian, or would-be historian, carrying out research on the life of a Trotskyist guerrilla, Alejandro Mayta, only to reach the conclusion that »real history« is itself »effectively« a novel (Vargas Llosa 1984, 77). Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* imitates Daniel Defoe in inventing what appear to be historical documents. Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* in turn imitates Peter Ackroyd by inventing an eighteenth-century account of the death of General Wolfe, and describes his book, as »a work of the imagination that chronicles historical events« (comparing his claim with Keneally's, we find that of the two, it is the novelist who sees himself as closer to the traditional historian) (Ackroyd 1985; Schama 1991). Umberto Eco conceals authentic medieval texts in his novel *The Name of the Rose*, which claims to be the transcription of a medieval chronicle, while the ancient historian Luciano Canfora's *Vanishing Library* is obviously inspired by Eco

and by Jorge Luis Borges in its account of the library of Alexandria and its destruction (Eco 1980; Canfora 1987). History and fiction appear to be »blurred genres«. In both forms of writing we find »the repudiation of realism, the collapse of the subject or character as an integrated or integrating entity«, and so on (Gossman 1990, 244).

The problem of bias has also returned in a more radical form as the question of the role of the investigator in the creation of the subject of investigation. And who is the La Mothe Le Vayer or the Pierre Bayle of our own time? One obvious candidate for the title would be Hayden White, who has been discussing since the 1970s what he calls »the fictions of factual representation« (White 1976).

Come back M. Varillas, M. de Saint-Réal and M. Leti, one is tempted to say, today all is forgiven, and everything is permitted. That is indeed the diagnosis of the present situation offered by some historians, Gertrude Himmelfarb for example, in an article published in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In this article, entitled »Telling it as You Like it: Post-modernist history and the Flight from Fact«, Himmelfarb presented a critique of Hayden White and of the historians who supposedly follow in his wake and that of Jacques Derrida, accusing them of abandoning the reality principle for the pleasure principle, of »a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it« (Himmelfarb 1992). In similar fashion, a decade or so earlier, the late Arnaldo Momigliano claimed that Hayden White had »eliminated the search for truth as the main task of the historian« (Momigliano 1981). There have been a number of recent debates of this kind in which the representatives of traditional history have dismissed new trends en bloc (Zagorin 1990, and Stone 1991, 1992).

I must admit to being more than a little unhappy with this extremely general criticism of recent intellectual developments. It reminds me of some seventeenth-century denunciations of the poison of pyrrhonism which lumped together René Descartes, Pierre Bayle, Jean Hardouin, and so on rather than distinguishing their different positions. Today, we are equally in need of fine distinctions. Attacks have been made from several directions on the citadel of traditional history, especially on what has been called »the myth of realism«, that is, on the idea that historians can discover »the facts« (usually in archives) and on the basis of these facts tell an objective story of »what actually happened« in the past (Tonkin 1990). (The quotation from Ranke has its own context, but it is repeated here as a useful brief summary of positivist claims); (Bann 1984, 8-31). The citadel's besiegers agree about what they oppose, but as so often happens in alliances, they do not always agree about what they support.



It may be useful to distinguish at least three disagreements between traditional historians and their critics.

1. In the first place, the critics charge traditional historians with paying insufficient attention to literary form. At the beginning of the century, G. M. Trevelyan made a similar charge against his colleagues. The difference today is the further claim that form is no mere outward ornament but has its own content. All the same, Hayden White caused something of a sensation in the 1970s by his argument that works of history are »literary artefacts« and more specifically that Ranke, Michelet, Burckhardt and Tocqueville followed literary models, consciously or unconsciously in »emplotting« their histories in the form of comedy, romance, satire and tragedy respectively (White 1973, 1974). In other words, written history is closer to fiction than historians have generally admitted. As a distinguished literary critic, Frank Kermode, was already saying in the 1960s, »Historiography has become a discipline more devious and dubious because of our recognition that its methods depend to an unsuspected degree on myths and fictions« (Kermode 1967, 36).

No wonder that the history of historiography, once on the margin of historical studies, has become increasingly central in the last few years. In similar fashion, in anthropology and sociology, which are going through their own crises, the question of form and »transparency of representation« has become a matter of debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 2; Geertz 1988). For their part, literary critics are increasingly interested in the forms taken by »literary nonfiction« (Fletcher 1976; Weber 1980; Siebenschuh 1983).

2. In the second place, the concepts and categories employed by historians – »feudalism«, »mannerism«, »absolutism« and so on, no longer look as firm as they once did. They are dissolving, or more precisely, they are revealing more and more clearly the signs of the times in which they were invented rather than the times to which they are supposed to refer. Like beauty, baroque seems to be as much in the eye of the beholder as in the work of art under examination. The great legal historian F. W. Maitland once remarked, jokingly or half-jokingly, that the feudal system was introduced into England not by William the Conqueror but by the legal historian Sir Henry Spelman. Today, his remark is taken more and more seriously. Terms like »feudalism« are now discussed as »constructions« or »representations« (Brown 1974). Taking the argument a little further, it is sometimes suggested that historians invent rather than discover their objects of study (Goldstein 1976, 1977; Nowell-Smith 1977).

3. In the third place, there is the claim that – even when they are not at their desks emplotting their histories or inventing their categories – historians cannot observe the past as it really was with an eye innocent of prejudice because they, like everyone else, are the prisoners of their »point of view«, in

other words the stereotypes, assumptions or mentalities of their own time, place and social group (including, of course, their gender). The rise of history from below and of women's history has made awareness of the problem of point of view even more acute. The debate resembles the seventeenth-century debate over bias, but takes it considerably further. Sociologists and anthropologists have been moving in the same direction, towards a sharper awareness of what it is convenient to call »ethnocentrism«. Hence the interest of a recent study by a historical anthropologist, Richard Price, who takes the multiplicity of viewpoints as given and organizes his work around this multiplicity. His study *Alabi's World* reconstructs eighteenth-century Suriname by means of an analysis of the records left by Dutch colonial administrators and German Moravian missionaries, supplementing them with oral history among the Saramakas in order to discover their point of view. His book is printed in four type-faces to make clear to the reader the viewpoint underlying a given paragraph – official, missionary, Saramaka or Price's own (Price 1990).

Finally (though not really finally, for this catalogue could easily be extended), there is the argument that the three points I have just summarized apply not only to historians but to historical actors as well.

i. What contemporaries wrote about their own time was shaped by literary forms. Claims of this kind have been made for generations by literary critics in their analyses of autobiographies (Tindall 1934; Pascal 1960; Hipp 1976). As autobiographies follow the model of earlier autobiographies, so the descriptions of foreign parts made by travellers owe as much to earlier travel writings as they do to observation (Pratt 1992). Even in the archives we find »fiction«, as Natalie Davis has recently argued, not (or not necessarily) in the form of lies but of »the crafting of a narrative«, as in her examples of the stories of violence in sixteenth-century France recounted by the perpetrators in the hope of obtaining a royal pardon (Davis 1987, 3). »Myth« is not just a name for bad history or for stories which primitive peoples tell themselves. Myths structure everyone's experience (Samuel and Thompson 1990).

ii. Contemporary categories as well as the categories of historians look increasingly fragile and fluid. Look what has happened to the idea of »tradition«, since Eric Hobsbawm described it as »invention« a few years ago (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). A number of nations, from Argentina to Scotland, have been described as »inventions« (Shumway 1991; Pittock 1991). Social classes, like castes, are increasingly treated as »discursive constructs«, in other words they are considered to be linguistic rather than social facts which create social reality rather than shaping it (Joyce 1991a; Inden 1992).

iii. More radically still, experience itself is coming to appear more and more like a construction. There was a time when Stendhal and Tolstoy shocked



people by describing events like the battles of Waterloo and Borodino in a fragmented and chaotic form, but today we are coming to take it for granted that this is exactly how we experience events, which are given their coherence and permanence only afterwards, by the media. Even individuals such as George Washington or Louis XIV are described as having been »invented« or »fabricated« in their own time, in the sense that a powerful public image of these leaders was projected by these individuals and their assistants (Longmore 1988; Burke 1992). In a way reminiscent of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, historians are increasingly inclined to place reality between brackets and to concentrate on representations (Husserl 1913, 107 ff). Or in a way reminiscent of Michel Foucault, they extend their idea of the real to include what is imagined. At any rate, they are more and more fascinated by the history of perception, more especially by images of the »other« – how Europeans have perceived Americans, the Occident perceived the Orient, the rich perceived the poor, men perceived women, and so on (De Certeau 1975; Said 1978).

Parallel to this historical debate there is of course a philosophical debate, about the nature of knowledge and the nature of reality, a debate which may be summed up in the phrase that the »mirror of nature« is broken and that what we used to call »reality« now appears to be a representation (Rorty 1980). In that case, the work of historians must be the representation of a representation.

Many of these points have been made before. As in the seventeenth century, however, specific local doubts, even mild ones, can add up and they can have a cumulative effect. If we speak of a crisis of historical consciousness today rather than a generation ago, it is because the doubts are affecting more intellectual areas (and of course more people). The pot has long been simmering, but it is now boiling over.

Is there a way out of the crisis today as there was in the seventeenth century? Personally, I believe that there is such an exit. One might begin by remarking that most of these challenges come in mild versions and extreme versions (»historians are closer to novelists than used to be thought« versus »history is fiction« and so on), and that the mild versions are a good deal more persuasive. It is one thing to argue that historians cannot tell the whole truth, another to dismiss their ideal of telling nothing but the truth, one thing to bracket reality and another to deny it. One thing to say that historians created the feudal system, another that they created William the Conqueror. The critics have sometimes used the device which Ernest Gellner once described as the »greasy pole«, sliding between radical claims and arguments which only support a more moderate position. They sometimes contradict themselves, as in the case of Edward Said, who tried to demonstrate that »Islam has been fundamentally

misrepresented in the West«, and at the same time to question »whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything« (Said 1978, 272).

Any attempt to resolve this current debate by declaring that »the truth is between the two extremes« would be both too vague and too dogmatic. Indeed, I rather doubt whether the way out of the crisis can be summed up in any simple formula. Like the application of the geometrical method to history, it is no exit but a cul-de-sac. Indeed, the whole point of offering you that long list of distinctions was precisely to suggest that different challenges require different responses.

If I may quote my own work for a moment, a recent book on the »fabrication« of Louis XIV was intended to demonstrate the reality of representations, in other words to show that the poems and festivals and engravings and statues and tapestries together had important effects on the perception of the king. In offering this demonstration, however, I had no intention of denying the existence or even the accessibility of a reality beyond these representations. On the contrary, what impressed me most when carrying out the research for this study was the extent to which contemporaries were aware of the discrepancies between the image of a hero-king and the everyday behaviour of Louis Bourbon. They knew, for example, that the king wore high heels, while gossip claimed that the king preferred love to war.

As in the seventeenth century, historians will have to modify not only their conception of reality but also their methods to respond to the challenges of the philosophers and the critics. In this domain the need to represent multiple viewpoints seems to me to be particularly important. *Alabi's World*, and also some twentieth-century novels, such as Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, with their various voices, offer historians possible models for this kind of representation. The paired speeches or »antilogies« in classical and Renaissance historians such as Thucydides, Poggio and Guicciardini performed similar functions (Romilly 1956; cf Struever 1970).

Even in the age of »blurred genres«, most historians still recoil from such a procedure, for the same reason that antilogies and other speeches were rejected in the seventeenth century, that they gave the false impression that past generals or statesmen actually spoke words which were written for them by later historians. All the same, it might well be worth trying to find substitutes for this technique. I attempted something like this in my book on the image of Louis XIV, following the description of his official image with a chapter called »the reverse of the medal« which was a kind of mosaic of hostile views of the sun king.



I have been trying to define and defend what might be called a moderate or Erasmian position, arguing that the way out of the present crisis of historical consciousness is to plead »guilty« to some of the charges against historical certainty, but to plead »innocent« to others, to adopt some techniques from writers of novels but to maintain historical writing as a separate genre from fiction (A good example of such discrimination is Spiegel, 1990, 1992). Such a position is doomed to attack from both sides, but I hope and believe that it is defensible.

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