

Two Crises of Historical Consciousness¹

By Peter Burke

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, both inside and outside the historical profession, though they are questions to which different people offer extremely diverse answers. Some people would describe the present situation as one of epistemological 'crisis'. If the term 'crisis' is employed in a precise sense, to refer not to any period of confusion but to a short period of turmoil leading to a major or structural change, then it may still be a little too early 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 turmoil is obvious enough, and it has led, as crises generally do, to a number of calls for 'rethinking history'.

One purpose of this article is to suggest that it would be unwise to study the philosophy or theory of history (in the sense of reflections on the purpose and method of historical writing), in isolation from the study of historiography. After all, the topical questions listed in the preceding paragraph are not new questions. They were being discussed with at least equal anxiety, excitement and irritation in the late seventeenth century. In order to put late twentieth-century problems 'in perspective', as historians like to say, and to achieve a certain detachment, this article will begin by describing and analysing the seventeenth-century version of this debate on historical knowledge. The second part will return to the present, to the current discussions of history as fact or fiction.

I

The possibility, the limits and the foundations of historical knowledge - like other forms of 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 age of Pyrrho of Elis (c.360-270 B. C.). Another 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.²

Another was the sixteenth century, when texts of the classical sceptics were rediscovered. For example, the famous Spanish preacher and moralist Antonio de Guevara wrote a semi-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 [historians] tell the truth more than others'.³ 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'.⁴

The mid-seventeenth century was a moment when the possibility, the limits and the foundations of historical knowledge became a matter of particularly vigorous 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'.⁵

Three French philosophers in particular played an important part in the articulation of this debate over historical knowledge, or as it was known at the time, over historical 'pyrrhonism'. René Descartes, in a brief but devastating remark in his Discourse on Method (1637), dismissed historical writings as misleading on account of their grand style.⁶ François La Mothe Le Vayer devoted a book to the problem of 'the uncertainty of history' - Du peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire. The debate was even more vigorous

in the age of Pierre Bayle, although it rumbled on well into the eighteenth century into the time of Voltaire.⁷ In summarizing this debate it may be useful to concentrate on arguments rather than individuals beginning with the attack on historical knowledge - the case for the prosecution and then turning 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, a common academic pursuit in seventeenth-century England, where the term was applied to deviations from the right path in politics and religion. The point of the metaphor was 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. In similar fashion, the French 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 'slant and mask them according to the image they wish to project [les inclinent et masquent selon le visage qu'ils leur veulent prendre].⁸

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 Carthaginian point of view as well as that of the Romans? How would Caesar's Gallic wars now appear if Vercingetorix and not Caesar had been the one to write his Commentaries?⁹ As so often in the period, concern with modern examples underlay the quotation of ancient ones, and La Mothe, for instance, was concerned with the bias of Spanish historians in their accounts of the wars with France.

Pierre Bayle expressed similar views a generation later in a discussion of the problem of bias which was occasioned by the publication of a history of Calvinism by an ex-Jesuit, Louis Maimbourg. The same facts, he suggested, can be used to write a eulogy or a satire, a panegyric or a pasquinade.

Hence Bayle claimed that he hardly ever read 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 interested him in a particular historian was precisely the prejudice.¹⁰

Thus Voltaire was not saying anything new but summing up more than a century of debate when he wrote his essay Historical Pyrrhonism (1769). He even used La Mothe's example of Rome and Carthage. 'In order to judge fairly', he commented, 'it would be necessary to have access to the archives of Hannibal's family'. Since he was Voltaire, he could not resist wishing that he could also see the memoirs of Caiphas and Pontius Pilate.¹¹

The second major argument for pyrrhonism 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.¹² 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 now dismissed as later forgeries. The so-called 'hermetic' 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 these criteria, parts of the Bible were challenged. So were some texts formerly attributed to the fathers of the Church. Some medieval documents too were called into doubt, including papal decretals, charters issued by the Merovingian kings and Icelandic sagas. A French Jesuit named Jean Hardouin, went so far as to claim that the majority of classical texts were forgeries. 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. However, he was only 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.¹³

The example of Hardouin shows vividly 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 seventeenth century, or that in 1700 one scholar described his own time as the 'age of criticism'. An increasing amount of what had been generally 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?¹⁴

Following in the footsteps of Descartes and his systematic doubt, some scholars went still further, at least in their thought-experiments. Had Augustus really existed? they asked. Had the emperor Charles V existed? Did the siege of La Rochelle really take place? Is 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 that sturdily common-sensical Scot 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.¹⁵ A reviewer in a learned journal dismissed the memoirs of cardinal de Retz as 'un ouvrage plus romanesque qu'historique'.¹⁶

Examples of this kind of criticism could be multiplied, but it is more interesting to note the existence of the minority view that historians did after all have something to learn from novelists. Thus Louis Maimbourg, the man whose history of Calvinism had provoked Bayle's critique, tried to ensure that his way of writing history would give his readers 'le plaisir d'un roman', while Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz wished for 'un peu du roman' in historical writings, especially when discussing motives.¹⁷

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 its own interpretations of historical events. The most famous examples were written by the abbé de Saint-Réal, whose Dom Carlos, published in 1672, dealing with the death of the son of Philip II of Spain, bore the sub-title 'nouvelle historique', a new term which soon became fashionable in France.¹⁸

Pierre Bayle, incidentally, enjoyed Dom Carlos and other historical novels of the time. On the other hand, he disliked the 'impudence' of writers who 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.¹⁹ 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. 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 (1720) and his Journal of the Plague Year, (1722) the latter complete with official documents and statistics to give it what modern critics would call a stronger 'reality effect'.

Why should this kind of fabrication have become fashionable at this time? 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.

But why did scepticism develop at this particular time? There are a number of possible explanations. Historical pyrrhonism clearly depended on the systematic doubt of Descartes and his followers. All the same, to make French philosophers responsible for the movement is rather like blaming Voltaire and Rousseau for the French Revolution. The rise of pyrrhonism was part of a complex of cultural changes.

The detection of forgeries, for instance, depended on the progress of philological techniques. The rise of newspapers in the later seventeenth century may well have contributed to the rise of scepticism, since the papers gave readers access to diverse and even contradictory accounts of the same recent events.

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. Bayle, for example, formulated his ideas about bias in reaction to a history of Calvinism published in order to justify Louis XIV's 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.²⁰

How was it that historians survived the crisis of the late seventeenth century? They had either 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.²¹

One way out of the crisis 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 a French bishop, 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'.²²

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, like Huet's, turned 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 witness from the event recorded.²³

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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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. 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 the eighteenth century in his 'art of lapidary criticism'.²⁶ Thus the debate with the sceptics had the unintended but extremely important 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.²⁷

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. Again, Gilbert Burnet distinguished the 'natural' bias of historians who favour their own side from the illegitimate techniques of slanderers like Varillas.

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.²⁸

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).²⁹

The key argument against the sceptics was the one about 'degrees of assent' put forward by John Locke in the fourth book of his Concerning Human Understanding (1690). Responding to Descartes and his followers, Locke argued that some historical statements are more probable than others and that some cannot reasonably be denied. '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'.

Perhaps the most interesting of the many refutations of Pyrrhonism was that produced by an acquaintance of Leibniz. His name was Friedrich Wilhelm Bierling and he was 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 use of modern examples make his discussion all the more lively.

Bierling's discussion of the obstacles to reaching historical truth makes the point, unusual for his time, that documents as well as literary sources may be biased, as in the case of the judicial records of seventeenth-century witch-trials. However, he argued that historians can use documents without believing everything they contain.³⁰

By the middle of the eighteenth century, at the latest, one may say that the crisis of historical consciousness was resolved, at the price of certain changes in the standards of historical realism. Voltaire's contribution to the debate came rather too late to be useful. There followed two centuries or so 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 philosopher 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.

II

Today, however we are experiencing another crisis of historical consciousness). Not the same crisis; there are no circular tours in intellectual history. If the first crisis was linked to the rise of modernity and Cartesian philosophy, the second is linked to postmodernity and the critique of Cartesian assumptions.³¹ Postrankean history cannot be the same as prerankean history.

All the same, the second crisis does take many of the same forms as the first, although the leading participants in the debate appear to be unaware of these parallels. The new French philosophers, notably Michel Foucault,

Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, have undermined the foundations of contemporary historical narrative, just as Descartes once undermined the grand narratives of humanist historians.³² Scholars debate whether key documents like the Hitler diaries are genuine or forged. Some people, not all of them neo-Nazis, go so far as to deny the existence of major historical events such as the Holocaust.³³ To the discomfort of librarians, and not only of librarians, the boundary between history and fiction has opened up once more.

It may be worth recalling a few well-known recent examples of the transgression of that boundary, as it used to be defined. Umberto Eco conceals authentic medieval texts in his novel The Name of the Rose (1980), which claims to be the transcription of a medieval chronicle. Thomas Keneally's Schindler's Ark (1982), now better known in the film version Schindler's List, claims 'to use the texture and devices of a novel to tell a true story' (Keneally has no doubts about the reality of the Holocaust). 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.³⁴ Peter Ackroyd's Hawksmoor (1985) imitates Daniel Defoe in inventing what appear to be historical documents.

On the other side, the historian Simon Schama's Dead Certainties (1990) seems to be imitating Peter Ackroyd by inventing an eighteenth-century account of the death of General Wolfe. Schama 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). The ancient historian Luciano Canfora's Vanishing Library (1987) is obviously inspired by Eco and by Jorge Luis Borges in its account of the library of Alexandria and its destruction. The old wall between history and fiction is collapsing.

The problem of bias has also returned in a more radical form as the question of the discursive construction of reality and 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 (apart from Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard) would be the American historian Hayden White, who has been discussing since the 1970s what he calls 'the fictions of factual representation'.³⁵

Come back Monsieur Varillas, Monsieur de Saint-Réal and Signore 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 1992. 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'. 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'.³⁶ There have been a number of recent debates of this kind in which the representatives of traditional history have dismissed new trends en bloc.

These extremely general criticisms of recent intellectual developments are reminiscent 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 distinctions, and it may be useful to speak of at least three disagreements between traditional historians and their critics.

1. In the first 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, a remark of this kind scarcely provoke a smile. Terms like 'feudalism' are regularly discussed as 'constructions' or 'representations'. Taking the argument a little further, it is sometimes suggested that historians invent rather discover their objects of study.

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 an 'invention' a few years ago.³⁷ Nations too, from Argentina to Scotland, have been described as 'inventions'.³⁸ Social classes, like Indian castes and African tribes, are increasingly treated as 'discursive constructs', in other words they are considered to be linguistic rather than social facts which shape social reality rather than reflecting it.³⁹

2. In the second place, there is the claim that - even when they are not at their desks 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'.

More radically still, experience itself is coming to appear more and more like a construction. There was a time when novelists such as Stendhal and Tolstoy could shock their readers by describing events like the battles of Waterloo and Borodino in a fragmented and chaotic form. In the age of television on the other hand, 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.

3. That brings us in the third place, to the so-called 'crisis of representations'. The critics charge traditional historians with failing to realize that literary form is no mere outward ornament but has its own content. As was remarked earlier, Hayden White caused something of a sensation in the 1970s by his argument that works of history are 'literary artefacts'.

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.⁴⁰ In a way reminiscent of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, historians are increasingly inclined to place reality between brackets and to concentrate on representations.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

As a result, written history has moved closer to fiction. 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'.⁴³

What contemporaries wrote about their own time was also shaped by literary forms. Claims of this kind have been made for generations by literary critics in their analyses of autobiographies.⁴⁴ Just 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.⁴⁵ Even in the archives we find 'fiction', as Natalie Davis has pointed out, not (or not necessarily) in the form of lies but of 'the crafting of a narrative', as in the example of the stories of violence in sixteenth-century France recounted by the perpetrators and set down by lawyers in the hope of a royal pardon.⁴⁶ In other words, 'myth' is not just a name for bad history or for stories which primitive peoples tell themselves. Myths structure everyone's experience.⁴⁷

It is scarcely surprising 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 questions of form, textuality and 'transparency of representation' have also become matters of debate.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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? One might begin to answer this question 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'.⁵⁰

To conclude. It is likely that, as in the seventeenth century, historians will have to modify their methods and even their conception of reality in order to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the philosophers and the critics. Any attempt to resolve the crisis by declaring that 'the truth is between the two extremes' would be at once too vague and too dogmatic. Indeed, it is unlikely the way out of the crisis can be summed up in any simple formula. Like the application of the geometrical method to history, this would be no exit but a cul-de-sac. Indeed, the whole point of offering a list of distinctions was precisely to suggest that different challenges require different responses.

So far as the point about concepts is concerned, historians have surely little choice but to accept the critique. They do not have to give up general

concepts like the 'Renaissance' or 'social class' altogether, but they need not only to write them but also to think them in inverted commas, in other words as constructions.

In the case of the point about representations, distinctions are once again in order. Recent work has demonstrated the power of representations, the power of the imagined, but it sometimes ignores the way in which audiences reject some of the representations offered them in the media. The concept of 'reality', despite the philosophical problems it raises, remains indispensable for historians at work as for all of us in our everyday lives.

A recent study by the present author on the 'fabrication' of Louis XIV attempted to demonstrate or at least to illustrate the reality of representations, in other words to show that the poems and festivals and engravings and statues and tapestries together affected the way in which the king was perceived in France and elsewhere. However, this approach does not imply the existence or even the accessibility of something beyond these representations. On the contrary, the sources made it abundantly clear that many contemporaries were aware of the discrepancies between the official image of a hero-king and the everyday behaviour of Louis Bourbon. They knew, for example, that Louis wore high heels in order to look more kingly, while gossip claimed that he king preferred love to war.⁵¹ Even if unmediated reality is inaccessible to us, it is at least be possible to show that some representations are further away from it than others.

It is, however, the second criticism of traditional historiography, the one concerning points of view, which has the most immediate practical consequences for the writing of history. In this domain, in an age when ordinary people, women, the colonized and a number of minority groups have all become more visible and more vocal, the need to represent multiple viewpoints is particularly important. The paired speeches or 'antilogies' to be found in classical and Renaissance historians such as Thucydides, Livy,

Poggio and Guicciardini used to perform this function, presenting the arguments for and against a decision or the aims of opposite sides in a war. Some twentieth-century novels, such as Aldous Huxley's Eyeless in Gaza, William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, or Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, with their various voices, offer historians possible models for this kind of representation. 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; in other words, that they give the false impression that past generals or statesmen literally spoke the words which were actually written for them by later historians.

All the same, it might well be worth trying to find substitutes for this technique, in order to show readers that in major conflicts - the Spanish Civil War, for instance - different sides operate with different definitions of the situation. This point does not emerge, for instance, from Hugh Thomas's admirably balanced and impartial history of the war. The book may even be criticized as too impartial, too olympian. As a result of the author's position above the battle, if we wish to understand how anarchists (say) or Carlists viewed the conflict it is necessary to go either to more 'biased' histories or to novels such as L'Espoir of André Malraux on one side or Gilles, by Drieu de la Rochelle, on the other. Might it not be possible to combine balance with the portrayal of opposed points of view?

Such an assumption underlies some recent studies of encounters between cultures; Columbus and the Caribs, Cortés and the Aztecs, and so on, which attempt to reconstruct the 'vision of the vanquished' as well as that of the victors. One of the most subtle of these studies is a recent book 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 perspective from which any given paragraph is written - official, missionary, Saramaka or Price's own.⁵²

To revert to the legal metaphor which historians have employed so often in the last five hundred years, the way out of the present crisis of historical consciousness may well be to plead 'guilty' to some of the charges against historical certainty, but to plead 'innocent' to others.⁵³ We might enrich historical writing by adopting some techniques from writers of novels, while maintain history as a genre (or better, a cluster of genres) which is distinct from fiction.⁵⁴ Although it is impossible to avoid a particular viewpoint - no one is above the battle, the present author included - historians might well put more effort into the presentation of views different from their own.

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- ¹ This article is a revised version of a lecture given in Budapest, Cambridge, New York, Rotterdam (the Pierre Bayle lecture for 1993) and São Paulo and I should like to thank the audiences on those occasions for their comments and questions.
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