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Literary criticism and the evidence for history

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The so-called 'linguistic turn' in history happened long enough ago that apocalyptic fears about the imminent disastrous end of the profession can be assumed to have been refuted by the mere passage of time. Largely a development in England and North America in the 1980s, we can date it, at the latest, to 1987 and John Toews' influential review essay, 'Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience',[1] whose title announced its accomplishment even as the body of the essay worried over its significance. Toews importantly points out that what the linguistic turn signified for the historian is not merely the parasitic use by one branch of history writing (intellectual history) of methods and perspectives properly belonging to another discipline (linguistics and literary criticism) or, even worse, the imperial colonizing of the discipline of history by the upstart pretender, literary analysis. The linguistic turn that history took in the 1980s was rather a local effect of a large-scale shift in emphasis that occurred throughout all the disciplines constituting the human sciences.[2]

This large-scale shift, we can summarize, was part of a redirection of academic inquiry that emphasized the question of how meanings come into being and their relation to experience. Meanings, this inquiry reveals, are the result of complex social and psychological operations that occur constantly at various levels in culture and society.[3] And the shift of attention to these operations as a matter for philosophical, anthropological and historical investigations thrusts the fact of language, and specifically of writing, into the foreground, for the production and dissemination of meaning takes place entirely within the symbolic sphere of expression and communications. In the process, literary criticism was transformed from a set of techniques specific to understanding the great artistic works of high culture, whose linguistic procedures are complex, evocative, highly

self-conscious and subject to infinite interpretation, to an indispensable part of any historical investigator's toolbox. For not since the biblical Adam first gave names to all the birds and beasts has a human being lived in a non-verbal world; rather, humanity is enmeshed in the webs of significance made from a world constantly spoken about, written about and argued about in language. Description of life is not passively recorded, but constructed. Experience is thus not something that happens 'outside' of language, something that language can follow after in order to give a more or less truthful account. Rather, experience – the experience from moment to moment of an individual or the collective experience of a generation or of an age – is something that always occurs in a world already spoken about, a world already saturated with meanings, already filled with language. Language is thus, in the first instance, always implicated in experience. And yet, individual and social experience is neither a totally linguistic phenomenon nor is it reducible to what is said about it: there is always an excess, something that seems to escape any account of what has happened and what that happening means.[4] It is this excess that opens the possibility of continuous interpretation, for no word is the last word, no account, however thorough, is ever the definitive account.

For the practice of history, the focus of attention on those operations in culture and society that create meanings in the medium of language has significant implications for three primary areas of activity: for the meaning of 'evidence', for the meaning of 'context' and for the fact that what the professional historian actually does, in order to do history at all, is to write a text, be it a book, an essay, a review or a class lecture. As we examine each of these spheres, what we shall need to attend to is a continual transaction between the new utterance and the language with its embedded values and descriptions that has been there all along.

The source as document

Let us begin by being painstakingly obvious. Historians work from evidence to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, the life of the past. Working from evidence and not making assertions beyond what can be supported by evidence are what constitute historical research as a discipline. We learn very early on to divide our information into primary and secondary sources. As we all know, secondary sources consist of material written *about* the entity we want to study, and primary sources are *of* the entity in question – produced by historical contemporaries. Primary sources are our evidence, for they are bits of 'past' material – usually but not invariably written material – still extant in the present. They are the products of a fuller past reality that no longer exists (that it does not exist *now* is, of course, what makes it past and what necessitates its reconstruction if it is to be known at all), even though fragmentary pieces of it still exist in the present and may indeed

have present uses, different from their uses at the time of their creation. Primary sources are thus traces of the past in the present, and historians use them to create an account of the fuller past that no longer exists and to which, as evidence, they provide a point of access. With certain exceptions – time capsules, suicide notes, certain kinds of archival records designed specifically for an anticipated posterity – historians use things for sources that were never intended by their makers to be sources. The source is the result of human activity; it is the material remains of the motives, intentions, aims, desires or plans of those who brought the 'source' into being to accomplish with it certain things in their own time: someone desired to distribute her property in a particular way after death and so made a will; someone else wanted to tell his sister in London about his first day at university and so wrote a letter home; someone planned to go to market and so wrote a shopping list. They did not intend these things to be 'sources' for us but rather to do certain things for themselves: to allay the anxieties of a loved one, for example, or to organize their own affairs.

I have described this obvious and well-known meaning of 'primary source' in what might seem to be an excessively obvious fashion precisely because it provides us with an important entry point to understanding the relevance of literary theory and criticism to the work of the medieval historian. I hope we can see from my description that nothing is a source as such; a source becomes a source only as it enters into a transaction with a historian to serve the historian's purposes, when it is used, in other words, as 'a document'. And this can be true even of those sources that are created with posterity in mind, for some of the most interesting historical documentary study occurs when historians use sources for purposes other than those for which they were intended.[5] What I cannot stress strongly enough here is the relational quality in what we conventionally call a source. Put most precisely, a historical source is not strictly an isolated entity, static or frozen in time, but exists now as a relation and in an act of reading. It is a relation between a present entity (let us get to the heart of the matter instantly and call it a text), a present reader of that text (in this case, the historian) and a disciplinary structure (in this case, history) that supplies the reader with an interpretive context, a purpose for reading and a protocol for interpretation. The source is a social fact, and one fully mediated by language.

Historians thus typically read sources as documents: pieces of the material reality of the past that more or less reliably provide a more or less clear window onto the world of the past that is the historian's object of study. And the profession has elaborated a fairly complex protocol of reading – source study – to maximize the reliability of the source for the historian. The language in which source study is described is typically judicial: the source, one says, is put into the dock, it is examined or questioned, it is made to reveal the truth, to become a trustworthy witness. And using the account that the historian is able to draw from the

source, the historian, in turn, can construct a new account of what the source has revealed about the social world which produced it.

As soon as one considers the historian's activity dynamically, literary criticism enters historical work at all points. For what I have just described as source study is in fact a complex act of reading. Although evidence can be any artefact whatsoever, in a highly literate culture like the European Middle Ages, evidence for working historians is primarily composed of written artefacts – laws, wills, administrative records of all sorts; as well as memoirs, letters describing people, places and events; a great variety of written accounts, ranging from informal narratives to self-consciously written history. Some of this evidence can be analysed by sociological or quantitative methods, but most evidence must be interpreted by other, more qualitative means.

In order to be a document at all, the source is almost always first and foremost a text (for not only written materials, but also social practices, such as religious rituals or social structures like kinship groups are texts in so far as they too are themselves part of the symbolic system by which a culture constructs its own meanings for itself). Historians tend to leave purely physical evidence, such as potsherds and kitchen middens, to the professional eyes of archaeologists. And to be a text at all, it must always be a text among other texts.[6] Calling the document a text emphasizes its structure of signification, capable of being read in various ways for a range of purposes and always subject to the properties of the symbolic system of which it is an instance. A text gets itself turned into a document in a very specific situation. By being read in a particular way according to a particular protocol, an interpretive procedure sanctioned by the discipline and its traditions, the historian interprets the text as a piece of past reality that reveals more of the past than it contains. Its particular meaning for the historian (as a document) occurs at the site of reading, not of original writing: it is not how it came into being but how it is read as a text among other texts that transforms the text into a historical document.

The source as text

Let us consider a concrete example. Here is an entry from the Hyde Chronicle, a monastic annal, described as generally brief, dry and businesslike.[7] It is the sort of chronicle entry that historians like, one whose language seems to be sufficiently transparent to cause few if any literary problems. The year is 1066:

> *Pridie idus Octobris, ipso die Sabbati, factum est bellum in Anglia inter Normannos et Anglos, in quo bello quamvis varius in primis utrimque fuit eventus et nulla morientium requies, tandem manifesto Dei judicio eodem die rex Haroldus, corruens morte sua et bello et Anglorum regno finem imposuit.*

> *Willelmus igitur Comes, potita victoria, ipso sequenti die Natalis Domini apud Londoniam elevatus est in regem, finitumque est regnum Anglorum et inchoatum regnum Normannorum.*[8]
> [On the day before the Ides of October, a Saturday, war was made in England between the Normans and the English, in which war although at first the outcome was indecisive for both sides and there was no respite from dying, finally by a manifest judgement of God, on that same day King Harold, rushing to his death, brought an end both to the war and to the reign of the English. Count William, having won the victory, on Christmas day following, was elevated to the kingship in London, and the reign of the English ended and the reign of the Normans began.]

This entry seems straightforward enough. Experts have dated the composition of this section of the chronicle to the reign of Henry I, within living memory of 1066. But as a source for understanding what went on at Hastings, this chronicle entry is disappointingly spare. It is suitable perhaps only to document the date (14 October), the duration (one day) and the decisive event (the death of King Harold) that brought the battle to an end, and thus to corroborate the more elaborate (and hence the more suspect) literary accounts of such eleventh- and twelfth-century sources as William of Poitiers' *Gesta Guillelmi* or Orderic Vitalis' *Historia Ecclesiastica*.[9]

To write the previous paragraph I have in fact performed a rather radical surgery on the chronicle entry. To read this chronicle entry as merely documenting the date, the duration and the event, I consider only a very small part of the content of the entry and, employing fairly ordinary standards of source study, I skip over the rest as irrelevant for my purposes. Employing as it does the language of miracle, portent and prodigy on the one hand (*manifesto Dei judicio*) and the most schematic and stereotyped indication of battle on the other (*quamvis varius in primis ... eventus et nulla morientium requies*), a good half of this chronicle entry falls outside the professional belief structure of a working historian and cannot be taken for a transparent window onto 'what happened'. That the chronicler calls the event 'a manifest judgement of God' explains nothing for us; rather it is the sort of thing that generations of historians have dismissed as medieval credulousness and superstitious belief; the sort of thing that has made medieval chronicles so notoriously unreliable as sources. And his account of the battle as indecisive at first, with much death on both sides, looks like the kind of fictionalizing elaboration endemic to texts of this sort. Was the battle really indecisive at first, we ask, and when did it become clear that the Normans had the upper hand? Reading this chronicle thus presents a general historiographical problem related to, but significantly larger than, the question of its documentary reliability, for in its claim truthfully to represent something that happened 'in reality', independent of the

confines of the narrative, historical writing requires the reader's assent to its own formal techniques of representation. And as we have just seen, a significant piece of this narrative stands outside those canons of truth that gain our routine assent; we pass over a great deal of what the writer chose to say in our search for a fact on which we may rely. What are the precise grounds by which we accept a part of an ancient narrative as providing a clear window onto the past and dismiss the rest?

We can begin to address this question by making a banal observation, but one with large and complex ramifications. For any experience whatsoever to be represented in a medium such as language, the experience needs to conform to a variety of constraints specific to the medium. One might think here of the mechanical constraints imposed by the huge apparatus needed for even the simplest shot in classic cinema. Equally important in film are the less directly material constraints imposed by the conventional vocabulary of cinematic representation. So too with regard to the more abstract and flexible medium of written language and especially with regard to what seems at first glance the 'natural' and entirely unproblematic practice of representation that we have been looking at – a practice of storytelling that seems to be a simple *mirroring* of experience in a transparent medium that draws no attention to itself as either a practice or a medium. Yet in dismissing much of the chronicle entry as unreliable – either superstitious or made up – what we are actually doing is judging its plausibility *to ourselves* and not its truth. Since wars for us are likely to begin on a particular day that we can name, a Saturday for example, the chronicler naming the day has the ring of truth; to assert that we know the will of God is less likely to provoke immediate assent from us *as professional historians now*, though it might well be quite plausible for the chronicler's own audience, as well as for a large segment of the population of our own contemporary world. We need to direct our attention differently. Rather than picking and choosing only those aspects of the source's content that are plausible for us to believe and because they are plausible seem true for us,[10] let us try to look *at* this chronicle entry rather than *through* it. How does this little narrative go about the business of securing belief in its representation of experience?

First of all, the chronicler uses the language of the calendar (*Pridie idus Octobris, ipso die Sabbati ... eodem die*) to insist that the whole event took place on a single day on which war broke out (*factum est bellum*) and came to an end (*bello ... finem imposuit*). The one-day war is thus absolutely decisive. The language of the calendar is also used to connect this single day to a second day (*ipso sequenti die Natalis Domini*) that supplements the first: what was decided on one day in October was ritually celebrated on one day in December. Operating along with the language of the calendar, and in fact making it possible, is the language of revelation: what provides the sole justification for precisely these two days and

only these two days to be noticed in the same entry is their being moments of the same revelation (*manifesto Dei judicio*), and thus in virtually the same words the English reign is twice said to have ended because it is twice shown to have ended (*et Anglorum regno finem imposuit ... finitumque est regnum Anglorum*), once on the battlefield on one day and once at the coronation ceremony on another day. In the chronicle entry, these two events, a one-day war and a coronation ceremony, become two moments of one and the same singular event. Reading this way allows us to see that it is the very matter that ordinary source study wants to skip over – the assertions that God's intention has been revealed – that structure the *whole* entry: the assertion of divine intention is the precise determinant of how the chronicler sees the event as a coherent narrative structure with a beginning, a middle and an end. In other words, this element is what enables the chronicler to present two days separated by two months as a single event, that is to say, as both an epistemological and ontological unity – something he understands because that is how it happened in reality. The complex temporality of this singular event, in which something that happens later and in a different setting – in this case, the coronation ceremony in London – is considered as properly belonging to what happened at first, both completing it and in the process revealing or clarifying its original significance, is very familiar as typology to students of medieval biblical hermeneutics. For typology was the principal method of reading biblical narrative as a literal record of an event in its own time and simultaneously as a foreshadowing or prophecy of a second event which completes it and properly belongs to it, thus integrating contemporary Christian experience with its Hebrew past.[11] And this recourse on the part of the chronicler to typology is no mere accident or simple 'habit of thought', as old-fashioned history of ideas would have said. Rather, it is an intrinsic part of the chronicler's historical understanding of this event as a transfer of regimes.

William claimed the English throne first of all by descent, then by election and finally by feudal right.[12] From this point of view, the Norman Conquest, in standard textbook terminology, was not, as it were, a conquest, but both the recovery of what was rightfully already William's own while also being a continual manifestation of the justice of that recovery, a judgement of God in a large-scale aristocratic trial by combat over the rights of land tenure. In fact, Eadmer, writing at the end of the eleventh century, attributes this very way of interpreting the significance of the Norman victory to the French:

> *De quo proelio testantur adhuc Franci qui interfuerunt, quoniam, licet varius casus hinc inde extiterit, tamen tanta strages et fuga Normannorum fuit, ut victoria qua potiti sunt vere et absque dubio soli miraculo Dei ascribenda sit, qui puniendo per hanc iniquium periurii scelus Haroldi, ostendit se non Deum esse volentem iniquitatem.*[13]

[Even now the French who were there say about this battle that although there was such various fortune on the one side and on the other, and nevertheless so many wounds and such flight on the side of the Normans, that their victory must truly and without doubt be entirely ascribed to a miracle of God, who in thus punishing the crime of Harold's perjury, shows that he is not a God who will allow iniquity.]

That a medieval chronicler signals this reading as a particularly French point of view indicates that there were others also in circulation. In noticing the way the chronicle entry presents the two days as a single event, we observed that the English reign is twice said to have ended in almost the same words (*et Anglorum regno finem imposuit ... finitumque est regnum Anglorum*). Let us note, too, that each day is rendered in its own single sentence. In its first sentence, the grammatical subject and agent of all the action is King Harold. In the precisely articulated Latin periodic syntax, everything is rendered as the attendant circumstances of three acts that King Harold performs: the first, his death, is subordinated to the latter two, which he performs, as it were, *post mortem*. Rushing to his death he puts an end both to the war and to the reign of the English (*rex Haroldus, corruens morte sua et bello et Anglorum regno finem imposuit*).[14] These are his last official acts as king, and they fully embody royal legitimacy: Harold, the last English king, brings *pax et iustitia* to his realm; he ends the war and it is he who in so doing ends English rule, 'by a manifest judgement of God'. If the first sentence is thus Harold's, the second sentence belongs entirely to William. In it, Count William becomes king (*Willelmus igitur Comes ... elevatus est in regem*). But in this, his only action, William properly does nothing: the main clause of the sentence is in the passive voice and the rest is made entirely of circumstantial and temporal constructions only loosely connected to him. The two sentences could not be more different. The first, Harold's sentence, is entirely controlled by the actions of the king; the second marks the precise moment when William becomes king and will be able to act henceforth. To this point, action (*potestas*) belongs to King Harold alone. The Hyde chronicler thus seems to take over the French perspective, that the conquest is in fact a divine judgement, but at the same time he maintains the legitimacy of Harold, as God's anointed king, to the last possible moment.

We need to observe one more thing before we are finished reading this little chronicle entry, something paradoxically most difficult to observe because it is so manifestly visible. The chronicle is written in Latin, and with Latinity inescapably comes a particular set of ways of rendering the social world, of framing experience and of asserting value. We have already observed that the chronicler uses the language of the calendar, but we did not say, among the great variety of possibilities that we can find in eleventh- and twelfth-century practice,

that the chronicler uses the Roman method of counting.[15] Similarly, it is the language of ethnicity (*Normannos et Anglos*), of dominion (*regnum Anglorum ... regnum Normannorum*) and of imperium and territoriality (*factum est bellum in Anglia*) that makes this event part of a continuum of public affairs that begins in Rome and stretches without break to the contemporary world of the chronicler. Many other chronicle sources quite self-consciously use the Roman language of state, administration and sovereignty, and speak of what happened at Hastings as a transfer of regimes over a geographically and historically coherent territory. William of Poitiers, for example, deliberately and at length compares the Conqueror to Caesar at several points in his narrative, as does William of Malmesbury.[16] In the case of the Hyde Chronicle, we seem to be in the presence of an inescapable function of Latinity rather than a deliberate authorial choice, a function which is as important as a structure of signification as it is difficult to see: *gens, natio, princeps, regnum* and *respublica* are simply applied to the affairs of the eleventh century in the way that a Sallust or a Livy applied them to the public life of the first century. And yet, deliberate or not, the language that stresses the continuity of public affairs puts a deliberately regularizing inflection onto the transfer of regimes in 1066. The Hyde Chronicle's representation of events thus merges three otherwise separate versions of historical experience: one based on royal legitimacy and the efficacy of consecration, one based on aristocratic methods of judicial determination and a third on ancient Roman notions of the public sphere. And modern conditions of universal statehood make this third and very ancient version appear to be all the more naturally and unquestionably appropriate to the story being told and thus to the reality of the world being represented.

To 'see' all this as belonging properly to the chronicle's account of reality requires a reading that we can loosely call deconstructive. In the strict sense, deconstruction applies properly only to the philosophical work of Jacques Derrida, and particularly to his effort to understand the logic of Husserlian and Heideggerian metaphysics, a philosophical task that led him to an extensive and thorough meditation on the properties of writing.[17] In the weaker sense that I am using here, deconstruction refers in the first instance to a particular kind of critical reading devoted to understanding the operations that construct the text as a meaningful object: in order to see and understand them – in this case, the operations that allow the text to function as a document for the historian – the enabling devices of the text must be disassembled and isolated. This disassembly also requires that the reader take into account the interpretive acts that he makes not only in order to read in the particular way that he is reading (as a critical historian) but in order to read at all. For as we observed earlier in our discussion, the 'meaningfulness' of a text comes into being as a social fact, something that occurs in the encounter between a reader reading in a particular way for particular

purposes and the written text produced in a particular way for its own purposes. Meaning is not simply poured into the reader by the writer through the medium of a text; it emerges rather at the intersection between the structuring activity of the text's language and the interpretive activity of the reader. Meaning is actively produced, not passively consumed.

We are accustomed to using metaphors of surface and depth to distinguish critical reading from what we think of as ordinary reading. We say that the critic discovers hidden meanings, reads between the lines or delves beneath the lines, finds buried implications, digs beneath the surface or mines the text. These metaphors are all misleading. There is nothing but white space between the lines and certainly nothing 'under' the surface. The fact, for example, that the Hyde Chronicle entry consists of two sentences, Harold being the active subject of the first and William the passive subject of the second, is as much a part of the literal surface of the text as is its assertion that the day before the Ides of October was a Saturday. What the reader – both the critical reader and his or her foil, the ordinary reader – does is traverse the surface of the text, and it is in that process of traversal that the signifying activity of the text operates. Part of my point here is that the kind of critical reading I have been pursuing leads neither to the dissolution of reality nor to a prison house of language with no exit. Rather, it allows us to see elements of reality embedded in the operations of language that otherwise we would not be able to see by 'ordinary' methods because it demands that we take all aspects of the text into account. Sentence structure is as meaningful in its way as information about who won the battle. In the case of the Hyde Chronicle, the matter of royal legitimacy seems to be of overriding concern: William did nothing in England before he was a consecrated king; as the chronicler rather vividly puts it, all the action was performed on a single day by God and his anointed representative, King Harold. And what of November and December? Medieval witnesses are surprisingly unforthcoming about the two months between the battle of Hastings and William's London coronation. For the Hyde chronicler those two months are precisely empty time: whatever happened was not only without significance, because the significance had already been revealed, but also was outside his normative modes of political understanding. There was no king in the land until the Christmas coronation. And without a king there was no public life.

In the relations that we have been discussing between a reader and a text, moreover, neither side is, strictly speaking, an individual. The reader comes to the Hyde Chronicle with all kinds of knowledge and expectations about reading, about chronicles, about the Middle Ages, about the work of the historian. This is an institutional knowledge born of previous reading, the encounter with previous texts, and in so far as it is disciplinarily informed, this knowledge does not belong only to the reader. The writer, too, comes to the task as already a reader. The writer thus produced this chronicle entry aware of such things as chronicles,

prayers, sermons, theological treatises, confessional protocols and no doubt also of such things as romances, love poetry and lists of things to do. To put it directly, every reading takes place in the context of other reading; every writing takes place in the context of other writing; and every text makes its meaning intertextually, that is to say, in the context and subject to the influence of other texts.

Texts in contexts

Both literary critics and historians rely frequently on context as a control for interpretation. In speaking of the context, we generally mean to evoke a picture of something like 'life as it was lived by ordinary people in, say, the eleventh century'. In fact, we often use the expression 'the big picture' as the metaphor for precisely this kind of evocation of life. Where do we get this big picture from? Often, of course, it comes from the visual media of the period in question – our mental images of World War II, for example, are notoriously in black and white, at least until Steven Spielberg put them shockingly into colour in *Saving Private Ryan*. It comes as well, as the example of the Spielberg film indicates, from popular culture and certainly from more professionally respectable primary and secondary sources that we may have encountered already in our work. In our imagination of the Middle Ages, knights fighting dragons and rescuing damsels in distress jostle for position with architectural renderings of the weight-bearing elements of gothic cathedrals and techniques of royal administration. We very often hear historians typically accusing literary critics of falsely claiming that they are 'doing history' when in fact they are simply going to secondary sources, even superseded secondary sources, or worse yet, textbooks, to find instant backgrounds in which to 'contextualize' their reading. Literary critics, in turn, accuse historians of using complex works of literary art in a flat-footed manner as straightforward evidence for a social or intellectual background that they already know by other means. And art historians accuse everybody of using monuments and paintings as if they were merely pictures of life as it was actually lived and not complex symbolic objects in their own right. In each of these various cross-disciplinary accusations of unprofessional behaviour, the context is always being invoked as the stable, material ground in which to anchor the difficult, slippery and ambiguous meaning of a text. In these mutual accusations the context looks like what we already know – daily life in the eleventh century or the Norman Conquest, for example, or 'courtly love' or feudal society – and we situate the text, we say, within it or use the text rightly or wrongly as an illustration of it.[18]

The relation of text to context looks very different in the operations of traditional source analysis. When historians speak of 'doing history' they often mean to refer to a process of building up a context from the more or less fragmentary evidence at hand. In this activity, the source, a little piece of the past that we are

attempting to reconstruct, is construed as a present part of a greater and lacking whole. There survives, for example, a record of a royal proclamation (what the specialists call a diploma) from the court of the Emperor Otto I, dating from the year 1001, that gives to the town of Cambrai the right to establish a market at Cateau-Cambrésis, and among other things to coin money there and institute officers for public affairs. This same diploma gives to the merchants at Cateau the same rights that 'the merchants at Cambrai' enjoy, and it says that any merchant who breaks the peace there will be subject to the same sanctions as are visited against the merchants of Cambrai. Historians have used this diploma, along with other very scanty surviving documentation, to develop a rather large claim about the expansion of the economy and changes in the population in northern France and Flanders in the early years of the tenth century. They have argued from the very existence of this diploma that the merchants of Cambrai and other ecclesiastical towns were already numerous enough by the year 1000 to deserve notice and even powerful enough to have their interests catered to by the emperor.[19] In this way, an argument about the surviving text is used to construct a large picture of the past of which the text is a small part. The ancient rhetoricians named this substitution of part for whole metonymy ('a meeting of the crowned heads of Europe' is a classic example), and indeed, the figure of metonymy is at the basis of much historical analysis: we treat a piece of evidence precisely metonymically when we fill in the patchwork provided directly by surviving evidence with the controlled inference of historical source study. In this process, it is the text which seems stable and material whereas the context is most definitely a construction: the text seems to be the solid evidentiary material out of which the necessarily more speculative context is constructed by the work of the historian.

In the act of thinking about a text in context the stable term thus moves from one side of the equation to the other depending on how we look at it. At one moment, the context seems to be the stable ground that limits the play of significances in the text; at the next moment, the text is the stable documentation that limits what can be said about its context. When one is stable, the other is unstable. Even brief reflection should convince us that since the location of stability depends on what we are doing, we need to conclude that in the dynamic act of contextualization there is in reality never a stable term. One powerful way of coming to grips with this indeterminacy is associated with the phenomenological approach of Hans Georg Gadamer, the so-called 'hermeneutic circle' in which one temporarily considers each side of the binary opposition, part and whole, to be 'known' or stable and moves successively from one side to the other, from using the whole to read the part and then from the part thus analysed back to the whole to reconstruct it, and so on.[20] In this approach, powerful as it is, an important aspect of the relationship between text and context is obscured, for text and context, part and whole, seem to be entities – and singular, material

entities at that. In our previous discussion of evidence, I suggested that a text is rather a relation than an entity, or even more precisely considered, it is a set of relations – between production and reception, and above all between it and other texts that it both evokes and differentiates itself from. And if we reflect on the various examples of context in the previous paragraphs of this section (examples drawn from film and popular culture as well as from historical documents and secondary sources) we may be led to the inescapable conclusion that what we conventionally think of as 'the big picture' is itself inescapably composed of a variety of texts. We could go so far as to say that a text makes its own proper meaning precisely by marking a position among other texts that circulate within culture. In our reading of the Hyde Chronicle we saw it as a deployment of at least three perspectives – which we could conveniently name royalist, French and Roman – in its representation of the event of the Norman Conquest. And what are these perspectives composed of if not of texts?

What then do we mean by context? Fundamentally, the context of a text is a threefold set of other texts relevant to a particular act of reading. It consists, first, of those texts already circulating in culture at the moment of production of the text in question, texts that in various ways supply the writer of the text in question with a conceptual apparatus, a way of speaking and a provocation to write. It consists, too, of those texts of which the text in question takes direct account. For, as we have said before, writing takes place in a field already occupied by texts, and these 'pretexts' are cited, rewritten, avoided, dismissed and revised more or less overtly, more or less deliberately and more or less consciously by the writer in order to make the new text. They supply the writer with arguments to contend with, to agree with, to avoid or otherwise to take into account. In this way they could at any moment become present to the reader of the text. Any text is thus always inclusive of other texts out of which it is made and which in this way form its context. The great Russian literary analyst, M.M. Bakhtin, calls this relation of text to context 'dialogue', and has demonstrated in a brilliant series of readings that all texts are thus in internal dialogue with other texts.[21] In this way, the context is never something outside the text into which the text is placed; rather, in order to be a text at all, the text is permeated by other texts. Derrida's remark, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' [there is no outside of the text], speaks of this directly. It sounds paradoxical, but it is nonetheless accurate to say that the context is thus already *inside* the text. Most obviously, the context is in the text because the text does not ever in any comprehensible way exist free of a context. There is no place to stand outside the text – even one as 'naïve' as our chronicle entry makes its meaning by deploying a finite but in actuality rather large series of other texts.

So far, I have treated context from the side of production. From the side of reception we can see the third textual relation of a text's context. For any individual reading is always informed by other readings. Our reading of the entry

from the Hyde Chronicle, for example, is made possible by reading in biblical hermeneutics and medieval political theory as well as by other eleventh- and twelfth-century accounts of the death of King Harold. In this way, I have situated the Hyde text among a number of other texts that the chronicler may not have taken into account as such, but whose relevance is clear to my reading and to my sense of the past that I am attempting to understand. Some of these texts that inform my reading are contemporary with the Hyde Chronicle. Some are composed in other periods, among which I include immediately relevant secondary sources but also a great variety of primary and secondary materials that go to form my sense of the eleventh century. If seeing the context *within* the text requires an act that we can call deconstructive, then situating a text thus *within* a context requires an act of construction. The context is never simply given but comes into being by the very process of a situated reading.

The historian's work is thus both deconstructive and constructive, and unlike investigators in many other disciplines, historians must construct the very thing that they take as their object of knowledge, a particular segment of the past. This construction is not quite material reality, but rather a representation of material reality as the real object of historical knowledge. Michel Foucault's use of the term 'discursive formation' draws important attention to the linguistic substance of much of what we unreflectively take to be elements of material reality, a big picture of life in the past.[22]

The task of the historian

Jacques Derrida was not the first to notice that philosophers are first and foremost writers. What we actually name as Kantian philosophy is a collection of written texts with features conforming to the protocols of a particular genre. Similarly, in an article that he says he would have preferred to title 'Footnotes, Quotations, and Name-lists', J.H. Hexter discusses the stylistic characteristics that identify history writing as what it is – a paper to be read at a conference, for example, or an essay to be published in a professional journal such as *Medium Aevum*, a book for a university press or a class lecture – and distinguish it from the report of a physicist or a lyric poem.[23] Historians are readers and writers; what historians do takes place fully in writing.[24] They produce new texts by reading other texts in particular, professionally sanctioned ways and by writing in very particular, recognizable genres whose characteristics – including such things as footnotes, indices and pages of acknowledgements – serve to differentiate them from other similar texts in contemporary circulation, such as novels and historical romances. As a writer, the historian works constantly under the constraints of language on representation as such. The work of representing a reality that does not exist because it no longer exists is an act both of imagination and of literary composition, even for a

historian working in the austere manner of a quantitative social scientist. The historian must secure the reader's assent to the likelihood that the historian's text is an adequate representation of the past. This compositional necessity allies the contemporary historian's work with that of the novelist, who also must secure the reader's assent to a reality constructed by the work of fiction. The novelist and the historian are both composers: they both must find convincing ways to sequence an event in language, to describe it with a thick enough texture of circumstance, to present the relation between individuals, social circumstance and changes over time in such a way as to gain the consent of their readership and their assent to the likeliness of the story being told. Now this similarity between fiction (a prose narrative that 'fictively' claims to be true) and historical writing (a prose narrative that claims a truth-telling intention) is unsettling, to say the least, and it has led to philosophical positions of extreme scepticism. The possibility of verifying any truth claim is compromised when we recognize that a truth claim is itself, strictly speaking, a performative utterance that takes place entirely within the confines of language, and the relation of words to the real world outside the text cannot be firmly demonstrated.[25] The metahistorical work of Hayden White and Louis Mink has carefully explored the implications of the compositional affinities between historical writing and fiction – White from a literary critical position of extreme scepticism and Mink from the point of view of classic philosophy of history.[26] Bernard Guenée, an important French medievalist, has used historiography to attempt to recover the possibility of source study as positive knowledge.[27] Gabrielle Spiegel has devoted much of her recent work to locating what she has disarmingly called a middle ground, theorizing the place from which it is possible to 'make' history without ignoring the unavoidable mediation of the discursive systems that always stand between the historian's utterance and anything that we might want to call 'the past'.[28] This is not the place to evaluate the relative merits of the various philosophical positions regarding the relation of textuality to historical work. What this multiplicity of perspectives demonstrates, however, is that textuality is an inescapable part of what the historian is faced with at every stage of work, from the analysis of sources to the creation of a finished argument. We cannot simply wish away our consciousness of language and its effects.

We live in a world saturated through and through with language and so did the people of the past. As we try to understand their world, both their moments of crisis and their daily life, we don't want to lose sight of the reality of their experience and their sufferings. The great fear provoked by the linguistic turn, that moment 'when everything became discourse',[29] to quote Jacques Derrida, was precisely the fear of the loss of contact with the humanity of the past. If everything was discourse, how would we find the world and understand the people in it? The answer seems to be given precisely by literary analysis. As we investigate the properties of representation, we discover that by taking into account not merely the

things that are being said directly by our documents ('it was a Saturday', for example), but also the linguistic mechanisms that allow them to be said and said in the particular way that they are (that a single chronicle entry, for example, is composed of two sentences, one active and one passive), we discover that the reality we are engaged in understanding becomes thicker, less rarefied, more nuanced and multidimensional. And as we extend our inquiry outwards from the single source into examining the textual contexts and the intertextual play inseparable from the particular document on which we happen to be working, we uncover the continual social and cultural pressure on what is being said, how experience is being formulated, what is included and what is left out. The forms, connotations and even silences of our documents are as much a part of their linguistic surfaces as are their statements; the relation of a single text to the manifold network of texts of which it is a part belongs as surely to its properties as the language in which it is written; and all these things can be made to speak to us. The heavy weapons, as it were, invented to assault the complex textual objects of high culture have become admirable and useful tools for the construction of a past reality out of its fragmentary textual remains. If the linguistic turn threatened to pull the rug out from under working historians, it did so, paradoxically, to reveal the solid ground beneath their feet.

Guide to further reading

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 50th Anniversary Edition, with a new introduction by Edward Said, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ, 2003).

M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series no. 1 (Austin, TX, 1981).

Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974).

Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1986).

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL, 1978).

Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD, 1998).

Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 2002).

Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD, 1997).

Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000).

Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD, 1973).

Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD, 1978).

Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD, 1987).

Notes

1 John E. Toews, 'Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience', *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), pp. 879–907.

2 Toews, 'Intellectual History', pp. 898–9.

3 Although writing particularly about the meaning of a text, Paul Strohm defines the sense of meaning in general as something that comes into being as a historical operation very nicely: '"Meaning" is . . . always shared out or held in common. The meaning of a particular text exists somewhere in the range between broad tradition and unique articulation, between authorial intent and a broadened diversity of uses and appropriations, between the work's meaning to its intended and actual and subsequent audiences. Never unitary, a meaning's history and status (when? to whom? for what?) must always be specified'. Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000), p. xvi.

4 Toews makes a similar point: 'Intellectual History', p. 882.

5 Robin Fleming, *Kings and Lords in Conquest England* (Cambridge, 1991), for example, used the Domesday Book, intended by William I to be a survey of land tenure, as a means to reconstruct the family structure of much of England. Similarly, David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber used the tax records of the government of fifteenth-century Florence to get at large portions of Florentine public and private life, including such things as diet and marriage customs. See David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains and the City of Verona in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Madison, WI, 1977), machine-readable data file, updated 12 September 1999, available from http://dpls.dacc.wisc.edu/Catasto/index.html (accessed 2003).

6 Roland Barthes' 1971 essay, translated as 'From Work to Text', has been very influential in contemporary criticism. Barthes, too, insists on the

same relational quality – meaning comes into being in a complex negotiation that equally involves the side of reception (reading) as well as production (writing) – and fully social implication that I have been trying to present. 'The Text is that *social* space which leaves no language safe outside, and no subject of the speech-act in a situation of judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder'. See Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1986), p. 64. Barthes here comes very close to a definition of Derrida's famous and famously mistranslated remark, 'there is no outside to the text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*)' that I will discuss below.

7 The terms are Antonia Gransden's, *Historical Writing in England* (Ithaca, NY, 1974), p. 411.

8 The text is from Edward Edwards (ed.), *Liber Monasterii de Hyda*, Rolls Series No. 45 (London, 1866), p. 294 (unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own).

9 For a critical discussion of the eleventh-century sources for the death of King Harold, see Robert M. Stein, 'The Trouble with Harold: The Ideological Context of the *Vita Haroldi*', *New Medieval Literatures* 2 (1998), pp. 181–204.

10 For a discussion of what is at stake in such picking and choosing, see Keith Hopkins, 'Rules of Evidence', review of Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (3rd BC–AD 337)* (London, 1977), *The Journal of Roman Studies* 68 (1978), pp. 178–186. The relation between plausibility, probable argument and the establishment of truth has been seriously studied in western culture since at least the time of Aristotle. It is one of the central topics of forensic rhetoric, and yet despite the prevalence of the forensic model and the common use of judicial metaphors in accounts of source study, the matter of plausibility has remained, with a very few exceptions, strikingly under-theorized in the philosophy of history. For an attempt to account for this under-theorization, see F.R. Ankersmit, *Cultural Memory in the Present: Historical Memory* (Stanford, CA, 2001).

11 See the classic studies by Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality; Studies in Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London, 1960) and Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis, MN, 1984), pp. 11–78.

12 For a good summary of the grounds on which William rested his claim to the English throne, see Raymonde Foreville, *Histoire de Guillaume le Conquérant* (Paris, 1952), p. xvi.

13 Eadmer, *Historia Novorum in Anglia*, ed. Martin Rule, Rolls Series 81 (London, 1884), pp. 8–9. One finds the language of divine judgement similarly used by Ralph of Coggeshalle, writing in England at the end of the twelfth century: 'Anno ab incarnatione Domini MLXVI. Willelmus dux Normannorum, contracto a partibus transmarinis innumerabili exercitu, in Angliam applicuit apud Hastinghes, ac justo Dei judicio die Sancti Calixti Papae, regem Haraldum, qui imperium Angliae injuste usurpaverat, regno simul ac vita privavit'. See Ralph of Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, Rolls Series 66 (London, 1875), p. 1.

14 *Impono* has a complex range of references, most of which are negative. Operative here is its sense of providing finality as in bringing an end to hope, putting the final stroke on a painting or bringing an end to war. See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879, reprinted 1969), s.v. impono II. A.

15 Throughout the whole of the Middle Ages there is great variability in calendrical practice. Ranulph Higden's universal Chronicle, finished around 1340, for example, begins by numbering years from Abraham, then with the reign of King David starts over again, while also noting regnal years of Hebrew kings and years from the founding of Rome. For the period after Christ, Higden provides both Anno Domini dating and the regnal year of the Emperor of Rome to Charlemagne; afterwards he records the regnal year of any nation whose actions he discusses, and therefore primarily the regnal year of the English king. This multiplicity of dating in one chronicle is rather the rule than the exception. See Ranulf Higden *et al.*, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis; Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, eds C. Babington and J.R. Lumby, 9 vols, Rolls Series 41 (London, 1865).

16 William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, trans. and eds R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford and New York, 1998). Cf. also William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, eds. and trans. R.A.P. Mynors, R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (2 vols, Oxford, 1998) , Book 3, section 254, subsection 3.

17 The degree of Derrida's importance is matched only by his legendary difficulty. The best entry point for Derridean deconstruction outside of the strictly philosophical camp are the essays collected in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL, 1978). The single most important of Derrida's texts for the field of literary analysis is Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD, 1998). Perhaps the best discussion of Derrida's critical significance is Edward Said, 'Criticism between Culture and System', in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA, 1988). The book as a whole is an invaluable contribution to literary analysis. For a discussion of Derrida's particular relevance to historical understanding, see Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'Orations of the Dead; Silences of the Living', in *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD, 1997), pp. 29–43.

18 For a historian's reflections on the problems involved in invoking 'what we all know' to be the context, see Elizabeth A.R. Brown, 'The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and the Historians of Medieval Europe', *American Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (1974), pp. 1063–88.

19 See Fernand Vercauteren, *Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres et des Science Morales et Politiques, Memoires 33: Etude sur les civitates de la Belgique Seconde: Contribution à l'histoire urbaine du Nord de la France de la fin du IIIe au XIe siècle* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1934).

20 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. edn (New York, 1994).

21 See especially the essays collected in M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX, 1981).

22 See especially Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 2002).

23 J.H. Hexter, 'The Rhetoric of History', in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, eds Brian Fay, Philip Pomper and Richard T. Vann (Malden, MA, 1998).

24 The classical historian Averil Cameron describes the whole process very nicely: 'In order to write history – to generate a text – the historian must interpret existing texts (which will often be, but need not always be limited to, written materials, for ritual and social practice constitute texts too). But he will interpret, or "read" his texts in accordance with a set of other texts, which derive from the cultural code within which he works himself; and he will go on to write his text, that is, his history, against the background of and within the matrix of this larger cultural text. Thus history-writing is not a simple matter of sorting out "primary" and "secondary" sources; it is inextricably embedded in a mesh of text'. Averil Cameron, *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989), pp. 4–5.

25 Nancy F. Partner, 'Making up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History', *Speculum* 61 (1986), pp. 90–117, reprinted in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*.

26 For Hayden White, see especially Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD, 1987), Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD, 1973), Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD, 1978); for Louis Mink see *inter alia* the essays by Louis O. Mink, in *Historical Understanding*, eds Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca, NY, 1987).

27 See the essays collected in Bernard Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval, Collection Historique* (Paris, 1980), and Bernard Guenée, *Politique et histoire au Moyen Age: Recueil d'articles sur l'histoire politique et l'historiographie médiévale (1956–1981)*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Serie Reimpressions no. 2 (Paris, 1981).

28 Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD, 1997).

29 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' in *Writing and Difference*.

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