

they say. And I agree with them not only because I find them brilliantly perceptive and endlessly suggestive, but because they wear their respective hearts where I think all hearts should be worn – on their sleeves. Of course I do not expect – if they were ever to read this text – that they would accept my own way of thinking about things for which they have nevertheless been in part responsible, nor to agree with the particular argument they have on occasion been brought in to support, or even that I have understood them. Yet, I have read them, and I think I have personally benefited from having done so. Whether these benefits are obvious, or are communicated here to others either adequately or persuasively, I am not at all sure, but I hope that, at least in small part, their goodness shines through.

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Opening time(s)

The reconciliation of all antagonistic forms in the name of consensus or conviviality is the worst thing we can do. We must close down nothing. We must keep open the otherness of forms, the disparity between terms; we must keep open the irreducible.

(Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*)

Once upon a time, a time which still casts its shadow over us, it was held that there was something *intrinsically* important in various historicisations of the past which could act as the basis of real and worthwhile knowledge. Put very basically, that old belief in the intrinsic value of the past was made up of two main elements. First, it was held that one ought to study the past ('the before now') 'for its own sake' and 'on its own terms', as if history was able to yield up its own essential points and not merely be the occasion for articulating our own. And second, by virtue of this attitude, the histories which were written by professional academics about this past were conceived of as somehow waiting to be *found* in the past; to be respectfully discovered and faithfully brought back to us, interpreted admittedly, but discovered – like fragments of some pre-existing jigsaw – all the same. The quest for this historicised past conducted *via* a research method that mixed empiricism and documentarism with the ethics of objectivity, neutrality and truth-seeking, further compounded the myth of the intrinsic value of the knowledge gained as a result of the exhaustive professional and scholarly efforts expended to get it. Not to subscribe to these two mutually reinforcing shibboleths of history – 'for its own sake' and 'on

its own terms' – it was argued, was at best to fall victim to all kinds of anachronisms, relativisms, scepticisms and contemporary ideological pressures, or, at worst, to succumb to the apparently disastrous 'logical conclusion' that anybody could say just anything they liked about the past. And this was not good scholarship in terms of painstaking, selfless enquiry, but merely ideological and political bias or self-aggrandisement.

Coming from a position which accepts that most things held by historians to be intrinsic (historical facts, structures, periods and meanings) are actually only extrinsic ascriptions, these kinds of scary 'logical conclusions' are ones I think we can accept with ease for reasons that I will illustrate throughout this chapter. For there really is nothing essentially *in* the past to prevent the exercise of endless interpretive freedom by historians; indeed, the only values to be derived from the historicisations of the past come from *outside* of the past and from *outside* the gate-kept craft-practices of the professional historian – in other words are *extrinsic* values. And such extrinsicality, which knows of no logical limits or proper procedures, is thus an open invitation to radical uncertainty for ever. Here at last we seem to have come to the end of the restraining proprieties of the professional, academic genre of history as we have come to know it.

The fact that 'the past' can be read at will and is so very obviously undetermining in relation to its endless appropriations (one past – many histories) is to be both celebrated and put into practice. To have one past but innumerable 'takes' and 'spins' is a positive value when everybody can at last potentially author their own life and create their own intellectual and moral genealogy – their own subjectivities – with no authoritative or authoritarian historicised past that one has to defer to or even acknowledge – especially a historicised past that seems to ghost-write itself with only the slightest intervention of the shyly-retiring historian, the handservant of the past loyal to his or her calling. For it is patently obvious that it is historians who create history and that 'the past' which they carve-up into meaning is utterly promiscuous. The past has and always will go with anybody without a trace of jealousy or a hint of permanent fidelity to any particular caller: hagiographers, antiquarians, professionals, Marxists, Annalists, Structuralists, fascists, feminists, pragmatic neo-Rankeans, anybody can

have it. And why not? Nobody has a patent on 'the past'; it can be used or ignored by everyone. And why is this? Because the so-called past (the before now) doesn't exist 'meaningfully' prior to the efforts of historians to impose upon it a structure or form; 'the before now' is utterly shapeless and knows of no significance of its own either in terms of its whole or its parts before it is 'figured out' by us. Consequently, no historian or anyone else acting as if they were a historian ever returns from his or her trip to 'the past' without precisely the historicisation they wanted to get; no one ever comes back surprised or empty-handed from that destination.

There are no empty-handed historians because there are no empty-headed ones: the historicised past is always only ever us – back there. This is not as obvious to students of history as it should be; indeed, most professional historians consciously or semi-consciously disavow their *always* present-centred practices as they strive to achieve the 'history narrator as nobody' effect. Few have unmasked this particular sleight-of-hand – (which enables historians to continue to give the impression that they produce 'objective' histories in what approximates to a state of socio-political weightlessness) – better than Michel de Certeau, who puts matters thus:

What peculiar kind of sustained, permanent ambiguity is it that historians practise ... by which a 'real' past is taken for granted, another 'real' past is represented in texts, and a 'real' present is effaced from their production ... The operation in question is rather *sly* ... [for] the 'real' as represented by historiography does not correspond to the 'real' that determined its production. ... The discourse [thus] gives itself credibility in the name of the 'reality' it is supposed to represent but this authorised appearance of the 'real' serves precisely to camouflage the very practice which in fact determines it. Representation thus disguises the praxis that organises it.¹

If, as de Certeau is arguing here, all history is really historiography (the accumulation of the writings that make up our representations and presentations of the past) and is always self-referencing in terms of its own credibility, then it seems that the best way to keep in mind the

always present-centred figurings of the 'past' into history (for to claim in the present that you should not be present-centred is no less a present-centred claim than the claim that you should) is to go along with Nietzsche's observation that the historian is, inescapably, *always part of the picture of the historical past he or she paints*. And there is no need to worry about this radical subjectivity, nor about the collapse of the old subject-object distinction so central to western philosophy and culture. For surely we are all now mature enough to recognise that what passes for 'objectivity' is only ever us 'subjects', objectifying. As Alain Robbe-Grillet cogently observes, this should not be seen as a problem:

Why ... should this be grounds for pessimism. Is it so distressing to learn that one's own view is only one's own view or that every project(ion) is an invention? Obviously I am concerned, in any case, only with the world as my point of view orientates it: I shall never know any other. The relative subjectivity of my sense of sight serves me precisely to define *my situation in the world*. I simply keep myself from helping to make this situation a servitude.²

We cannot escape the inevitability of our own subjectivity then – we can only ever see the world from our own 'subject in formation' perspective. But as Elizabeth Ermarth (commenting on Robbe-Grillet) suggests, this is nothing to worry about; it is this kind of postmodern self-consciousness in which we recognise and become aware of our own radical subjectivity that prevents us 'from helping to make this situation a servitude'. In other words, engaging with our own subjectivity, defining our own 'situation in the world', requires a constant questioning and probing of our own assumptions and values. In turn the production of this sense of critical self-distance (at times an almost out-of-body experience) encourages endless imaginings and rethinkings of what our personal and political identities might be. With some confidence – which I share – Ermarth concludes that, today, we no longer need an objective world to guarantee relations between one consciousness and another or to guarantee an identity between illusions. For 'there is only subjectivity ... only illusions' she writes, which can only constitute momentary realities: 'The postmodern

moment comes in negotiating the transition from one [such] moment to another'.³

None of this is to say there are no 'criteria' for judgements and/or that we must therefore accept that everyone else's discursive 'reality' and historical constructs are all *equally* correct or all *equally* wrong. This is the supposedly knock-down argument so beloved of modernist historians as they raise the spectre of some looming ethical nihilism and consequent barbarism. For although there is no *ultimate*, objective foundation for our historical positions (or our moral decisions), we do still make decisions on the basis of preferences according to the tools at hand in any given social formation, we do still put worlds under descriptions, and we are still able to give (relative to such descriptions) argumentative support for them to those who might decide to listen to it and engage in conversation. And this has always been the actual situation. In that sense, nothing has changed. Apart from everything of course. For we are now fully aware that we have to live with an intellectual outlook where truth and objectivity, neutrality and disinterest, are simply agreements produced in conversations which are always between interested parties and within and against which we do have to make ultimately groundless decisions. By which process of thinking we arrive neatly at Jacques Derrida's formulation of 'the undecidability of the decision' (to be discussed further later on); a condition in which a decision has unavoidably to be taken (for even to refuse to make a decision is still a decision) but taken without certainty and 'subject' to endless revision. This is a condition of *logical openness* which also happens to be – for it keeps decisions always in a state of play, defying definitive closure – 'a good thing'.⁴

It is into this conversational/discursive condition that any intervention – a book, an article, a film, a novel – will make its noticeable or not so noticeable mark; beyond the reach of authorial intent, open for endless readings, and there for the relative taking or leaving. And the intervention of this book is no different. So, to the question of why still bother to historicise the past today and how best to do it, the answer which I register at this point is that I hope that a certain way of thinking may help allow the kind of emancipatory, radical politics essayed by Ernesto Laclau and others to enter the world, a politics of

emancipation Derrida has also decided – as a citizen if not as a philosopher – never to abandon.⁵ Especially now. For never before on the face of the earth, he writes,

... have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine and economic oppression affected so many human beings in the history of the world and of humanity. Let us never forget this obvious, macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable, singular sights of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore the fact that never before in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the Earth.⁶

My reason for still bothering with history thus revolves around a calculation of the degree to which the historicised past must escape all and every closure; must escape the closures of assumed objectivity and truth in the cause of personal and social freedom and of justice to come. And yet here, perhaps in its most mundane (or banal) expression, a question arises from the preoccupations of the mainstream professional historian which is ubiquitous in its presence and so may have already occurred to you. I would like to address it now so that I can get it out of the way before beginning to argue my case at length.

The question is this. If it is (the really rather obvious) case that there can never be a ‘true interpretation of the past as history’; if it is very clear that you can never achieve a total and sufficient account of anything; if the impossibility of ever getting a definitive synopsis is begrudgingly *accepted* today as common-sense by just about every historian who thinks about it, then why on earth do people (like postmodernists) feel the need to keep going on about it? Historians are not stupid; surely they know all this? Are they not all at least liberally minded pluralists happy with numerous interpretations/interpretive differences? Is it not the case that many if not all of the positions associated with postmodernism – the various crises of legitimation, the absurdity of grand narratives, the acknowledgement of ambivalent and multiple readings, the overlapping of linguistic games with shifting rules and players, and so on and so forth – surely all these things and more, are now part of the weft and weave of everyday intellectual life? As is the much more grudging acknowledgement (or at least consideration) that relativism,

perspectivism and ethical/moral undecidability ‘go all the way down’. In this sense, are we not all postmodernists now?

To which I think the answer is, well no, actually we are not. I do not think that historians have given up on objectivity and truth; on the desire to make history a discourse truth statements are variously applicable to: an epistemology. These intentions may well be qualified nowadays but they have not been given up. And I do not think historians have all become happy relativists either. They should have done but they have not. Most professional historians remain stubbornly ‘modernist’; that is, they remain intent on producing substantiated, empirically detailed and well-researched accounts in the name of accuracy and balanced, meticulous scholarship. And I think there are at least three good reasons for saying this is still the general situation.

First, whilst we may all be pluralists now, this does not mean we are all postmodernists. Postmodernism and pluralism are not the same thing at all; the former is not reducible to the latter. This type of reductionism attempts to slough off the ‘extremes’ of postmodernism so as to make it reassuringly familiar. Yet it misses the point entirely, for postmodernism *is* its extremes, *is* all that modernity cannot be compatible with. What postmodernism does to history – as Lyotard has pointed out – is to undercut the *form* as well as the *content* of discourse.⁷ So what does this statement mean?

Well – problematising the *content* of the historicised past and various aspects of it – say for example, providing multiple readings of the French Revolution – is now par for the course. Obviously. However, nothing could be more ill-informed than professional historians who think they are ‘postmodern’ just because they accept multi-levelled perspectives; nothing could be more uncomprehending than to think that multi-interpretation is ‘all postmodernism is about’ and that, this accepted, then it is back to business as usual. For it is not. No, what postmodernists problematise is not the *content* of history so much as the status of its *form*. No matter how well formulated the *form* of history might be – its method, shape and structure – we can *never* show a definitive example of it. Thus, whilst many professional historians still retain the comforting thought (comforting because it sets limits/boundaries as to what can count as ‘proper history’) that multiple

readings regarding the *content* of their discourse can at least be lived with because they remain within the *form* of a familiar history ('at least they're all historical'; 'at least they all respect the evidence'), the problematisation of the *form* of history takes this reassurance away. Consequently, it is now impossible to *ever* say what history really is (so that the query famously posited by E. H. Carr – what *is* history? – cannot ever be answered definitively) nor, by extension, what history's proper methodological procedures are. This is alarming for most professional historians of course, for if nothing is 'proper' any more then logically anything goes. Few professional historians, no matter how liberal and open to 'interpretation', can accept that interpretation – the interminable undecidability of history *per se*.

Second, *insofar* as our social formation is one of liberal, pluralist, modernist toleration, then that qualifying *insofar* registers 'the fact' that this is very much a social formation of arbitrary and always somehow hurtful closures. All social formations to be 'social' have to exclude, it is just that ours is one that tends to think of itself as an exception to the rule, one that prides itself on its liberal pluralism, its inclusiveness and hence its toleration. But this is partly a delusion, and a 'return' to even more repressive closures – of a radical intolerance – is a constant danger. Indeed, we might say that ours is *currently* a *recovering* social formation. Just as, for example, a once alcoholic is always a 'recovering alcoholic' – with all the dangers of a relapse into the previous addictive condition – so our social formation is a 'recovering sexist', a 'recovering racist', a 'recovering homophobic', a 'recovering xenophobic' social formation: relapse is always possible. And indeed, even this reading is far too generous for those who remain on the receiving end not just of previous but continuing – and *multiple* – manifestations of injustices; of as yet only partial recoveries. Moreover, and widening this out again, Derrida's invocation of the absolute enormity of global subjugation and pain in his *Spectres of Marx* is not about another 'globe' or another time but about this globe and this time. *Historians should have something to say about this*, but all-too-often their putative values of objectivity, neutrality, detachment, non-worldly 'academic' scholarship and specialised erudition about some aspect not of the now but of the past, become alibis for silence. With much justice Sande Cohen can thus argue that 'proper' academic

history can best be seen as a 'reactive' part of bourgeois culture. For Cohen, historians tend to locate what is happening in the non-narrative present actuality (subjugation and misery are not narratives) in a longer, contextualising narrative form, as if to understand what is happening now you have to analyse not the present but what preceded it. But this really is an odd sort of displacement which promises to explain the now by *never* examining it. The frequent justification for the study of history – that it helps us to understand the way the world now is – is in fact one of its very hollowest. And as for changing the world...⁸

Third – and this argument is a preoccupation not just of Derrida but many others including Jean Baudrillard, J. F. Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Ernesto Laclau and is one I shall be developing at length later – any social formation (and in particular our technical, cybernetic, capitalist social formation with a vengeance) inevitably attempts to reproduce itself in as stable a condition as possible so that all potentially destabilising and thus dangerous excesses are either absorbed or rigorously excluded. This is the process of hegemonic social reproduction and attempted closure which Baudrillard has described as 'the perfect crime', which, were it to be achieved, would be so perfect that no-one would ever know that it was taking place as it quietly folds unwanted phenomena such as difference, otherness and the excess – all that cannot be digested by current social and political formations – into the old and the familiar without remainder, without any 'loose ends'.⁹ In this social formation – which Baudrillard argues against throughout his works – future events would not take place, not in the sense that things would not happen but in the sense that they would not disturb; all future shocks would be absorbed and the threat of their possibly radical alterity neutralised. Here the future would be preprogrammed into the status quo to ensure a desired continuity and so 'permit' a controllable flow from the past through the present into the future. All of which means – *and this is the point I want to make* – that for the past to link up with and support the ongoing present and its expectant future, then one could not and cannot – just cannot – allow the past to be read 'any way you like' by just anybody. By extremists; by non-historians. For the past, if it is to help ensure the reproduction of the status quo within acceptable limits (within those famous 'liberal

tolerances') cannot be totally open so as to allow innumerable inheritances, abnormal genealogies, interminable idiosyncratic figurings and refigurings and 'lessons' to suit all and every occasion – this is far too risky. No, what is required are proper, responsible, academic histories (historians) operating within acceptable limits and armed with all the usual gate-keeping paraphernalia: academic standards, publication controls, peer reviews, benchmarks, responsible and efficient methods and, in the wings, latent, ostracising power. That most academic historians do not think of things this way is due precisely to the silent and hidden mechanisms of ideological power in our current social formations that simultaneously permit us to operate within such limits whilst hiding them from us; the complicity is all so beautifully innocent – ideologically speaking.

And so, in the name of a future which will hopefully not be a reproduction of the same, that will run out of control; in the name of a future that is open to strange, wondrous, disrespectful and disobedient workings, I hope that the umbilical cord that intravenously feeds the past, present and future with the sustaining power of the status quo, can be cut in order to allow for new births. The very best reason I can finally think of for saying that we may still need to have generous, open histories which are both highly reflexive and explicitly emancipatory, is that they might just help to prise open the attempted closures of modernist historical thinking for the benefit of those who have still not yet managed to get out of it.

In praise of excess – using Derrida

I come now to our last theme, decision, without which indeed there would be neither responsibility nor ethics, neither rights nor politics ... A decision, as its name indicates, must interrupt, cut, rend a continuity in the fabric as the ordinary course of history. To be free and responsible, it must do ... more than deploy or reveal a truth already potentially present ... I cannot decide except when this decision does more and other than manifest my possibilities, my power, my capacity-to-be. As paradoxical as it may seem, it is thus necessary for me to receive from the other ... the very decision whose responsibility I assume. What I decide for the other, he

decides as much for me, and this singular substitution ... seems at the same time impossible and necessary. This is the sole condition of the possibility of a decision worth its name, if ever there were such a thing: a strangely passive decision that does not in the least exonerate me of responsibility. Quite the opposite.

(Jacques Derrida, *Deconstructions: The Im-possible*)

Let me now begin to develop the above remarks at the first of the two levels I discussed in the Introduction: to illustrate how historical openness is logically assured, that closure can never be achieved, and that such openness can hopefully be developed in the name of an emancipatory radical democracy by refigurings of the past. And I want to do this by leaning heavily on Jacques Derrida, a Derrida generally ignored by historians and many philosophers of history – a situation I hope to help rectify whilst in pursuit of my own project.

Jacques Derrida is part of that extremely powerful way of thinking which emerged in France in the 1960s and which opposed the idea that 'full presence' or total knowledge could be accessed and fully known through language.¹⁰ What Derrida and many of his fellow French thinkers were doing was showing amongst other things the impossibility of reducing the infinite possibilities of thinking about what history might be to the finite or to the knowable. What was being celebrated here was thus the (logical) impossibility of closing down radical thought by constraining it within familiar *figures*. Indeed, what Derrida was concerned with was the logical impossibility of the definitive closure of *anything* so that future newness, or as Derrida terms it the 'to come', 'the promise', 'the perhaps', 'the arriver', 'radical difference' or 'alterity', is welcomed as both 'a risk and a chance' – as an exciting possibility or adventure.

So how does Derrida – who I want to use here as arguably the best example of this particular strand of French thought – guarantee such openness? Let me answer this by working towards history from his views on language. This may seem an unlikely place to start from if the desire is to subvert history, but it is not. For if language is interminably unstable – if it cannot be definitively fixed and thus 'closed' – then every discourse, including history, built as they are on and with language, must be unstable and thus perpetually open too. Language is actually

the obvious point to begin, after which I shall look in turn at Derrida and 'decisions', Derrida and 'reading', and then directly at the implication of all these things for history. I perhaps ought to point out, given the generally received wisdom that Derrida is an extremely difficult writer, that some of what follows in the next few pages may need extra concentration. But such effort is, I think, well worth it. One of the problems with historians is that they do not have the patience to work at understanding theorists and theory (in this case Derrida and his idea of deconstruction); they do not have the desire to see the relevance of the kinds of things Derrida is talking about to their practices. But this is to leave such practices uninfluenced by some of the most exciting and searching ideas currently in circulation. In one sense of course this neglect is understandable, in that historians may 'intuit' that his ideas fatally compromise so many of their assumptions. But not being such a historian myself, it is these ideas which I want to help 'raise to consciousness' here.

On language

Let me start by saying that if a word was meaningful 'in and for itself' it would be what is called a transcendental signifier, that is, a word whose meaning was both self evident (so that as soon as you heard it or saw it you would know what it definitely meant) and that its meaning would remain the same for everybody throughout space and time. But obviously we have no access to a signifier like that. Of course, historians will not be surprised at this; it is obvious, they will say, that words change their meaning relative to their historical context. And they are right. But this sort of view, expressed at this sort of level, is too general to catch what it is that Derrida is saying at the level of language (of linguistics), and so it is at this level – where ostensibly stable meanings are subverted 'logically' – that we must begin.¹¹

Because no signifier, no word, is meaningful in and for itself, then, because no signifier's meaning is immediately obvious outside of all contexts, then signifiers necessarily get their specific meanings *relative to other signifiers*. Consequently, a signifier always needs what Derrida calls supplementing by another signifier or set of signifiers to become a concept – what Derrida calls a signified. For example, take the word

God. In order to explain what is meant by this particular signifier/word, we would have to add to it (supplement it with) a lot of additional qualifying terms such as Father, redeemer, omnipotent, Saviour and so on, the problem being that there is not a logical or finite number of such terms (or adjectives or predicates) that can be used so as to make them all add up to, be identical with, the word God 'once and for all'. We can always get another term, another adjective, another predicate to qualify the subject of our attention – God. And if this is the case, if we can never close down every possible description of God, then the word's meaning always escapes us and so becomes logically open forever.

And Derrida wants to say that all words are more or less like the word God. For Derrida, meanings are thus constituted not by self-sufficient signs/words, but through the phenomenon he describes as *différance*. In this notion, a signifier like 'God' can, as we have seen, only get its never-fully-completed meaning *relative* to other signifiers (Father, saviour and so on); it always needs *supplementing* by another set of signifiers to become a meaningful concept. But because the relationship between any two signifiers is never automatically derived or fixed or uniformly patterned, then the potential meaning that occurs when signifiers are connected is always contingent, arbitrary and logically unstable. For there is no logical guarantee that next time the supplementary or qualifying predicates that come will be the same as those which arrived before, therefore future meanings are always logically open. Moreover, given that words and their meanings rarely come in isolation but are generally embedded in chains of signification (in sentences, paragraphs, pages and texts) then the meanings of words within these various con-texts cannot be relied upon to retain their meanings in a stable way. Here Derrida wants to argue that the second signifiers differ spatially and temporally from the first; that they are spatially laid out so that those qualifying terms always come late – we need time to read them. This space/time structure is universal and everywhere; even though terms are repeated they are always slightly different according to the words surrounding them – when you arrive at the same words in a new context after you have met them in a previous one, the meaning will not be exactly the same. With *différance*, then, there is no way of getting meaning into the world that

you can be absolutely certain of forever. Language like history – to repeat – never repeats itself.

This is not to say that words and discourses are not, despite their interminable differences, *relatively stable* in practice. And indeed it is this seemingly fixed nature of meaning that often mistakenly makes people think that there is something essential *in* language ... so that, for example, some historians suppose there is something intrinsic in the name of history that exempts it from being given endlessly new meanings and connotations rather than seeing that 'history', like all concepts, is an 'empty signifier' (a point I shall explain fully in Chapter 2). So meaning of any sort/type can never be permanently stabilised for the reasons I have just explained. And what the deconstructive approach then does is to extend this 'principle' from the linguistic into the social realm, giving it a particular political currency and urgency. Deconstructionists try to show how our various social institutions, conventions, law-codes and political systems are all attempts to stabilise 'unstable and chaotic' social and cultural formations. According to Derrida, what a

... deconstructive point of view tries to show is, that ... conventions, institutions and consensus are stabilizations ... are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus, it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural; it is because there is instability that stabilization becomes necessary. Now, this chaos and instability ... is at ... the same time ... a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exist and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other.¹²

So, as Derrida observes, the 'natural' chaos and instability of our social condition/circumstances is not a bad thing at all – for it contains within it the chance of new things to come, a chance to change things, to destabilise those stabilising systems that help legitimate existing misery and pain/suffering. So Derrida links the provisionality and openness of

language directly to the future of radical democracy¹³ – a permanent opening up of politics to *time* which questions any necessity of looking back to what has happened before: *we really can begin again*. Thus it is at this point that the past – the historicised past – enters into Derrida's thought as something which, although we cannot escape it fully, is something to make decisions about in the light of the present and the future, not for history's sake (as if history really had a sake, an intention of its own that we have to respect) but ours. Only we can decide – as best we can – if and when the past matters.

On decisions

It is at this point that we arrive at Derrida's idea of the decision; at his idea of what he calls 'the undecidability of the decision'. Again, and to reiterate, this is a crucial part of Derrida's arguments as he seeks to destabilise meanings (so that as we have just seen, new meanings can enter the world not least for political reasons) and to make us think, always, of the necessity to imagine in new ways rather than just rethink the old. Derrida's writing on his meaning of 'decision' is, again, complex. But simplifying massively I think I can get to what Derrida is driving at if I approach his idea via his discussion of justice.

Probably the easiest way to understand Derrida's notion of justice is to begin with the maxim that 'nothing repeats itself exactly' – and for our purposes here, especially not history. All decision-making situations are unavoidably new and distinctive, and any attempt to ensure that justice is done will not be served by merely reapplying previous decisions or laws, no matter how similar the circumstances. For if one refers back to, say, a previously worked out decision (or ethical system or law code) and merely applies it to a different situation; that is, if the decision that is made is merely the reapplication of a *previous* rule or formula, then no decision has been made at all, only an administrative act, which in turn means that justice cannot be done to the new situation in all its radical singularity; its uniqueness. All decisions thus lack sure foundations and are ultimately arbitrary – undecidable – this is what Derrida calls the '*aporia*'; the moment of undecidability through which one must pass when making a 'real' decision. Ironically, then, and against those who would tell you that

learning the lessons gleaned from 'history' and living within already constituted ethical systems are precisely what we *ought* to be doing, Derrida argues that to make a decision and make it for the first time such that justice is done to both the decision-making process (which must always be knowingly undecidable so that every decision is a kind of experiment or invention) *and* to the recipient of the decision (who must never be pre-judged, even if such pre-judgements are enshrined in the most revered law codes), then at the moment of the *aporia*, the decision, one must *never* look to the past. For if you fold the new and the different into the old and the same, then all the possibilities of newness are negated; are said 'no' to. And Derrida always tries to say yes – 'Yes, Come', for saying no to newness is to effect a closure and this is very precisely *injustice*.

Of course Derrida thinks that, actually, no one has ever made an entirely just decision. But that is the *aporia* again. We might want to make a pure decision but we never can; we are 'always in a text already'; always already situated and constrained by our past and what we have wittingly and unwittingly inherited from it. And yet, though strictly impossible, in the name of a notion of justice that resists total understanding, one ought to try to be as free from one's inheritance as circumstances permit so that the least *violent* decision is enacted upon the other who is on the receiving end of it.

Moreover, it is the 'other' (this is the gist of the long extract from Derrida which heads this section) – the one who is affected in all his/her singularity by the decision – who will be the judge as to whether justice has been done to them and their unique circumstances. Derrida's ethical decision is thus never the simple expression of liberal individualism (free-choice-ism), for if it were then it would just be the incorporation of the other into one's own value system irrespective of theirs; the reduction of 'the other' to 'me', the reduction of the interest of justice to 'my' interests. No. For Derrida it is the other who will decide if what is done to them is just or not; they will tell me (as 'the other in me') if I am just; if I am ethical/moral. And of course that judgement by the other in me – their decision – cannot ever be perfect either, simply because he or she cannot totally escape their inheritance any more than I can mine. But nevertheless, the very idea of this impossible justice is the condition of the possibility of our efforts to

think of justice 'justly' at all. And it is this *aporia* – that we must try to think in singularities if justice is to be done and yet we can never do it – that *logically* guarantees that every decision will always be, more or less, an act of necessary arbitrariness (or 'violence' as Derrida describes it). And so we reach another of these paradoxical *aporias*; there is no justice/ethics without arbitrariness or violence and with regard to this violence, no way of knowing, for sure, its extent. And Derrida likes all of this; likes the fact that we will always be a little in the dark; that at the heart of things lies a secret; that we will always get things wrong; here failure is not avoided or denied, but valorised. For Derrida the structure of the *aporia* therefore ensures radical doubt for ever and thus guarantees the impossibility of any total answer and, hopefully, total(itarian) certainties; here freedom lies in failure.

On reading

It is this idea of radical doubt, this idea of freedom through creative failure, this idea that we can decide which way to read things, that underlies Derrida's idea of what 'reading' ought to be. And again this is important. For if the past has to be 'read' to be understood (which it does), indeed, if it is the very act of reading which makes the past historical, which constitutes 'the past as history', then we can say that we both can and must read the past as a text or, more accurately, *as if* it were a text. For it is only textually that the past can be appropriated; can become the subject of our imagination.

This is not to say (as many critics of postmodernist approaches do) that the past is literally a text (a book, an article, a document and so on). Nobody (least of all Derrida) is saying, for example, that the Russian Revolution was just a text rather than an event, an actuality. Rather, what is being said is that it is only textually – as a piece of writing or another form of representation – that such an event can become the subject of our attention and our imagination. And I want to suggest that this requires that we read the historicised past as we read everything else, creatively and imaginatively of course, but also – whether we know it or not – unfaithfully, disobediently, between the lines. So what does it mean to read the past imaginatively? If, as the Derridean scholar Geoffrey Bennington argues, no text can compel an obligatory

or necessary reading of itself – in fact it will always point beyond itself to another reading yet to come – does that mean that we can read a text in any way whatsoever? The answer is no.

For no text is open to any reading whatsoever; no text is absolutely indeterminate if one's comments are going to be about *that* text. Indeed, for Derrida, texts are always to be read *twice*; a first reading (a commentary or explication for example) which tries to be as faithful as possible to it, followed by a second reading whereby the text is subject to a series of interruptions which open up the various points of undecidability, moments of decision-making or *aporias*. In this way the text deconstructs itself through the tensions of its own fault-lines, its own interior inconsistencies; a deconstruction preparing it for an alternative reading it never intended to allow. Texts do not want to implode by virtue of their own *aporias* – but they cannot prevent this from happening. Consequently, it is this unintended freedom to read texts other-wise which actually – and this is the key point – constitutes a *reading* of them at all rather than a passive decipherment or commentary. Indeed, says Bennington, there couldn't be a 'reading' without this opening so that any reading, however respectful of the text being read, takes place and can only take place as an invention or act of disobedience in this space. This is why 'texts' are *not* messages and why classical theories of communication so beloved by most professional historians – who stress the need for texts to be clear, fully communicative, commonsensical and unambiguous – completely miss the point. For it is only when communication breaks down – when you 'just don't get it' – that the only meaningful acts of communication take place. It is only when – to make sense of it – you have to *rewrite* it for yourself, *figure* it out for yourself, that there is the chance of 'real' communication (real 'understanding') occurring. Consequently, for Derrida (and Bennington) the ethics – and thus the politics – of 'historical' reading, consists in negotiating the spaces opened up between the *faithful* first reading and the *unfaithful* second so that a degree of infidelity to any given text – *including the historicised past as a text* – is the constituent factor in reading. The ethics of reading suggest you have to try to get the text 'wrong' so as to open it up beyond its own attempted closures so as to make it yours. This is where things are turned on their head in relation to a normal, scholarly reading and the

intentions of the text. For a scholarly reading tends to close down the internal inconsistencies and openings that allow a disrespectful reading in the name of 'faithfulness to the record', out of 'a respect for the voices of the past', and in an attempt to understand them 'on their own terms' so as to get them *right*. A deconstructionist reading is not so complicit.

On history

It is at this juncture that we arrive directly at history in two senses. The first sense, the first way that the above bears on history, is to see how there is always a series of decisions to be made as to what history is deemed to be and that, secondly, those ideas, being undecidable, leave the meanings of future histories open. And to make this point as strongly as possible, I want to say that there is always an unavoidable tension between what can be called the ideality of History (spelt with a capital H as if there really was a true History that transcended all empirical locations), and its actually always empirical grounding. What does all of this mean and how does it work? Well, let me start by claiming that operating here is what might be called in turn two guiding principles. The first is that to get meaning into the world through a discursive practice such as history there is always an unavoidable tension between any ideal concept (which Derrida calls the transcendental gesture) and its empirical or material inscription. That is to say – to begin to explain this – that although in every case the ideal concept of History is the motivation for its empirical working-out or elaboration, the empirical world is always unable to realise the full potential of the ideal. Thus History can never be fully present or fully known, its discursive practice always falls short of the desired 'ideal'. Paradoxically, then, the idea of history in its fullest sense is irreducible to any amount of empirical inscription, yet this is the only possible expression of it, the only way we can get the experience of thinking about it in the first place.

This leads to Derrida's second point, that the inter-relationship between the ideal and the empirical is characterised by an irremovable tension between them which Derrida once again calls *aporetic*, such that the creation of meaning carries within it the seed of its own deconstruction. Indeed, it is this unbridgeable gap, this permanent lack of

total identity between ideality and the empirical, that is so crucial to Derrida. I am going to explain this further with an example, but first we might note that Derrida has a formula for expressing this tension which goes like this: that the condition of possibility for thinking (gesturing) towards History (and Politics, Ethics and so on), is simultaneously the condition of the impossibility of these ideas ever being able to find full realisation. So for instance, a historian like E. H. Carr in his book, *What is History?* thought that he could actually answer the question as to what history is by giving lots of concrete illustrations which, when put together, meant that you would have a definite idea of a history based on a sufficient number of material examples. Thus, Carr thought, for example, that history was a dialogue between the past and the present, and that with careful scrutiny of the past historians could demonstrate human progress and perhaps even project it into the future. But the problem here is that someone else could always come along (and they have) and give to the subject term 'history' lots of *different* characteristics or predicates and claim these as defining the subject 'history'. Accordingly, because we can never make the predicates or characteristics of anything (in this case 'history') equate to the ideal of 'History' once and for all and without remainder, we can never know what history really is.

Though we need the idea (ideality) of history to start thinking about history at all, then, the empirical manifestations we have to think such ideas through are never good enough – we can always get some more qualifying predicates. So that, living in the middle range between the ideal (the transcendental gesture) and the empirical, means that any decision made to try to fix a definitive meaning for history is always arbitrary, always inadequate. Located between two unstable poles (for the idea of History is really just a heuristic device as unfixed and contingent as the empirical), any decision as to what history is is ultimately an arbitrary choice along a spectrum which, stretching to infinity as spectrums do, is not a fixed decision at all but is rather eternally re-fixable; eternally refigurable. Yet even though failure is written into the very idea of History, we must, for meanings to be produced at all, decide for pragmatic purposes and on no sure foundations what we want the term to mean for us. Derrida talks here of the 'undecidability of the decision' as to what history and

so on is, and will be. Here the future of the 'question of history' lies logically open, forever. And this logical openness is crucial for Derrida because he desires a future that welcomes what is to come in all its possibilities. Accordingly, the past – past politics, past ethics and the past *per se* – cannot determine the future in any logically entailed way and, argues Derrida, it ought not to do so; the present and the future is everything.

This is not to say that we can escape the past as such, 'the before now' as such, completely. But we can and we do always cut it up to suit ourselves. And indeed we may decide to so carve it up that it hardly exists; that it is, to use a phrase, 'very little – almost nothing'. But be that as it may, the point is that to inherit anything from the past necessarily involves a range of unavoidable selections, abridgements, appropriations, cuts and spins. To take just something from the plenitude of a 'full inheritance' involves endless and ultimately undecidable (aporetic) decisions. For as I explained at the beginning of this chapter, the past cannot tell historians which aspects of it 'it' wants them to study. The past contains nothing of intrinsic value, nothing we *have* to be loyal to, no facts we *have* to find, no truths we *have* to respect, no problems we *have* to solve, no projects we *have* to complete; it is we who decide these things *knowing* – and if we know anything we know this – that there are no grounds on which we can ever get such decisions right. As Bennington neatly observes, in the inevitable decisions that we have to make throughout our lives 'fidelity is always marked by, or tormented by, infidelity'. For Derrida then:

The radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance ... is never fully gathered ... Its presumed unity, if there is one, can only consist in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. You must filter, select, criticise; you must sort out among several of the possibilities which inhabit the same injunction ... in contradictory fashion around a secret. [For] if the legibility of a legacy was given, natural, transparent, univocal; if it did not simultaneously call for and defy interpretation, one could never inherit from it. One would be affected by it as by a cause – natural or genetic. One always inherits a secret which says: 'Read me, will you ever be up to it?'¹⁴

And the answer is that we are 'never up to it'. We can never know the exact status (truth) of that part of the whole we inherit, for we do not know the whole, the totality of history. Always partial and thus failed appropriations, inheritances are never 'full', never complete(d). The sifting out of that which is historically significant depends on us, so that what 'the past' means to us is always *our* task to 'figure out'; what we want our inheritance/history 'to be' is always waiting to be 'read' and written in the future like any other text: the past as history lies before us, not behind us. Derrida again:

Inheritance is never a given; it is always a task. It remains before us ... 'To be' means to inherit. All questions about being ... are questions about inheritance. There is no backward-looking fervour in recalling this fact, no traditionalist flavour. [No] ... we are inheritors; the being we are is first of all our inheritances; like it or not, know it or not.¹⁵

The past is never (in that sense) over and done with, but is to be made tomorrow and the day after – and who knows what will happen tomorrow? The past is thus open to unstoppable newness; undecidable decisions and refigurings of a sort logically beyond any curtailment: anything can come; 'anything goes' – like it or not, know it or not. Even history's disappearance.

Resume/preparation

Derrida is constantly alerting us to the constructedness of what we call the 'reality' of the 'extra-linguistic', and he is relentlessly, let us say, Socratically suspicious of the prestige of the ruling discourse, of the system of exclusions that is put in place when a language claims to be the language of reality itself [the past itself]; when a language is taken to be what being [the past] would say were it given a tongue.

(John Caputo, *The Prayers and Fears of Jacques Derrida*)

Let me pull together some of the main points of this chapter and prepare the way for the next.

The reason I have used Derrida so much in the foregoing pages is that he, more than anyone else in my view, has yoked together the demonstration of the impossibility of linguistic/discursive closure with an emancipatory, political promise. Indeed, Derrida declares himself as having 'no tolerance for those who – deconstructionists or not – are ironical with regard to the grand discourse of emancipation'.¹⁶ And it is in the name of this discourse that I have tried to show why and how we need to break out of the certainties of professional histories and re-figure the past, 'the before now', so as to inscribe within it an unavoidable and interminable uncertainty for ever. As stated in the Introduction, in Chapter 3 I attempt to sketch out a disposition which might allow us to imagine historians who no longer earnestly chant their mantra of anti-theory, objectivity, non-present-centredness and truth-at-the-end-of-enquiry spiced with just enough of that interpretive *frisson* that they like as they pretend to be so 'open-minded', but who welcome expectantly the non-foundational nature of all our figurings in every verb-tense (past, present, future) and their relativistic status. Contrary to what its critics may say, this is not an irresponsible position but one which arguably brings with it new moral responsibilities that are unavoidable; I have no alibis for any of the undecidable decisions I alone make in all my singularity.

But that is in Chapter 3, and between that and this first chapter lies Chapter 2. And that has its own contribution to make. For I am fairly sure that most professional historians will think that what I have said so far is pretty irrelevant to their everyday practices, if not totally irrelevant to them as human beings. Professionally speaking, at the level of the practice of history *surely*, they will say, the methodological and other procedures of the 'guild' offer ways of closing down those reluctantly acknowledged gaps between the real and its representation/presentation which give rise to the possibility of a knowledge – an epistemology – that is still strong enough to bear that name. And I want to say that at the level of the meaningful historical text this is not a possibility. And so in the next chapter I look at some of the arguments which take away so many of the foundational presuppositions historians fall back upon when they try to justify their knowledge-making, epistemological ambitions. In

this way I will argue that a history without foundations and thus made up of a series of arbitrary yet responsible decisions is precisely – if we need a history at all – all that we need: histories which are open invitations to that which has never yet been; histories which do not try to repeat themselves.

Last order(s)

Once across the threshold of postmodernity – and most of us have already crossed it here and there whether we like it or not – history in its traditional sense, along with its founding unitary subject, are no longer possible simply because the postmodern world is not one system but many. The discursive condition [of postmodernity] is not congenial to the One World Hypothesis, nor to the assumed value of neutrality, nor to the project of objectification with its emphasis on individual viewpoint and emergent form. With the recognition of postmodern complexities, neutrality and the rest of the values associated with history do not necessarily become lost, but neither can they remain universally applicable and, therefore, immune from choice or rejection. They are properties of some systems and not others, and the choices between them are vexed and difficult ones.

(Elizabeth Ermarth, 'Beyond History'; *Rethinking History Journal*)

This chapter builds on the last one through six interconnected sections all of which have the intention of clearing away many of the presuppositions held by professional historians so that new refigurings of 'the before now' can be made. The position I am arguing for should be well established by now, but a reiteration of it in an idiom different from the Derridean one used previously – a historical rather than a philosophical one – might serve to 'set up' this chapter as well as introduce one of the two main 'resources' for it, Hayden White. For White's point – that the insistence by academic historians that *their* stipulated definition of history is *really history as such* is a hindrance to a much