

1 Understanding history

Hermeneutics and source-criticism in historical scholarship

Philipp Müller

In his private correspondence the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen did not hesitate to call a spade a spade. Reflecting on the achievements of Leopold Ranke who was already considered one of the most important founders of modern historical scholarship Droysen declared: ‘Unfortunately . . . because of Ranke and his school we have become lost in what is called source-criticism whose entire feat consists in asking whether a poor devil of an annalist has copied from another.’¹ Because of Ranke’s influence Droysen felt he had a hard time convincing his fellow historians that the decisive part in studying history was not the verification but the interpretation of the sources. In his letter he continued: ‘It has caused some shaking of heads when I happily contended that the historian’s task was understanding or, if one prefers, interpreting.’² By emphasizing the significance of interpretation Droysen did not intend to neglect the merits of critical source-reading. As a matter of fact, his ‘Historik’, a series of lectures where he explained the scholarly principles of history, includes one of the most detailed accounts of the methods to establish the credibility of historical documents that was ever written. But at the same time, Droysen believed that history had to go beyond the mere collection of true facts about the past and, in his eyes, this was exactly where his predecessors had failed to develop a proper explanation of scholarly procedures. He especially held Ranke responsible for a simplified image of history that did not recognize that one could only gain historical knowledge through interpreting historical records. As far as Droysen was concerned, Ranke’s search in the dust of the archives was only the first step to be taken in order to reconstruct the past.³

This picture in which Droysen advances a more sophisticated outlook on history while Ranke personifies the daily drudge of historical research by providing the tools of source-criticism, however, neither does justice to the tradition of classical scholarship and its techniques of textual criticism, nor does it correspond with the actual practice of Ranke’s historical writing.⁴ Even if Ranke has often been credited for having invented the critical methods of professional historical research his originality in that respect has been much exaggerated.⁵ What really distinguishes both Ranke and Droysen is their treatment of historical facts as evidence of an object that could only be grasped by a specific mental act which has become known as ‘*Verstehen*’ (understanding). Rather than just representing another technical issue, understanding history took shape in the theory of hermeneutics and became the

core procedure of the historian's work not only in Germany but also in European and North American historiography. In the following chapter, Ranke (1795–1886), Droysen (1808–1884) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), three main proponents of hermeneutics in historical scholarship, will be discussed in order to give a picture of the development of its basic structures in the nineteenth century.⁶ Although their efforts differed considerably, each one of them contributed to the emergence of a modern approach to interpreting historical sources with lasting effects far into the 1960s and beyond.

Humanism and textual criticism

In order to fully appreciate the idea of understanding and its meaning it is first necessary to outline the development of critical source-reading before the nineteenth century. The techniques of historical criticism were imported from other disciplines which developed the need to verify and secure information much earlier than did historiography. Historians of the early modern period were more interested in moral and rhetorical questions than in knowledge of the past for its own sake. Classical philology, biblical criticism and modern jurisprudence, on the other hand, were drawn into a sense of scholarship that forced them to base their knowledge on reliable sources.

The humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries began to consider the established picture of the classical authors of antiquity as distorted. Until then the tradition of the classics had been based on generations of handwritten copies which had altered the texts either because their content did not correspond with the religious and moral beliefs of the copyists or because of mistakes in the process of reproduction. As a consequence, humanists understood antiquity as a lost world that had to be recovered from its remnants. Anything that was thought to belong to the age of the Roman Empire or the Greek city-state (*polis*) was now considered to be worthy of conservation. The humanists started to search for old manuscripts all over Europe in order to retrieve the original form of Latin and Greek texts by comparing different copies to each other. They stressed that it was important to master the old languages as an instrument to differentiate between original sections and later changes.⁷ Although their inquiries were aimed at resurrecting an idealized picture of antiquity which, in itself, was not submitted to historical scrutiny, humanists developed a new sense of tradition that worked its way through to sources without accepting the form and content of the documents they found as given.

Even before these forms of criticism were introduced into the study of history they were adopted in theology. Clerics of the seventeenth century published collections of records and documents concerning the history of the church and began to take an historical interest in Christian traditions. The critical reading of sources led to new conclusions concerning the transmission of the texts of the Bible. For example, in his 'Histoire critique du vieux testament' of 1678 Richard Simon, a French clergyman, identified different layers of language in the Old Testament. He pointed out that the sections which recounted the history of the flight of the people of Israel from Egypt did not show a coherent structure. Arguing that the text

included knowledge on events after Moses' death Simon rejected the traditional view which still took Moses to be the author. He concluded that instead of an original account the Bible contained only a mangled version that was composed long after the events had taken place and was produced by writers from different times and backgrounds.⁸

In addition to philology and theology, textual criticism also made its way into jurisprudence before it came to be regarded as a distinctive feature of historical scholarship. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the status of the traditional corpus of Roman law as a collection of texts that should govern contemporary jurisdiction was challenged. French critics like Guillaume Budé and Jean Bodin were convinced that the original Roman law within the 'Corpus iuris' was buried under medieval glosses and commentaries which had misunderstood the meaning of ancient notions because they had not bothered to study the change of judicial institutions and terms.⁹ Again, the humanist tradition of textual criticism emphasized the significance of primary sources and encouraged systematic vigilance for possible distortion. In order to detect mistakes of tradition, different versions of texts had to be compared to each other, the verisimilitude of the textual content had to be examined and the style and language checked.¹⁰

In Germany, historians adopted the practices of textual criticism in the late eighteenth century. Scholars like Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig Schlözer conceived of history as an immanent process that reflected the course and development of mankind. Academic historical studies increasingly began to define themselves as a scientific discipline that was concerned with true knowledge of the past that could be gained by reconstructing and studying primary sources. Especially at the reform-minded universities of Göttingen and Halle the methods of source-criticism were spelled out in systematic guidelines for historical research and became a cornerstone of academic training.¹¹ As a consequence, professional historiography changed its character: rather than simply rewriting the accounts of their predecessors historians were now supposed to produce historical knowledge that was justified by verified information. While philology had used textual criticism to restore the original wording of documents, history used the techniques of restoration of texts to establish reliable knowledge of the past itself.¹²

Therefore, when Ranke famously proclaimed, that he wanted to show history 'as it actually was', basing his historiography on the strict practice of textual criticism, he was not a methodological revolutionary in source-reading.¹³ Rather, he followed an already established path which had been prepared by classical philology, the historians of the late enlightenment and recent historians of antiquity like Barthold Georg Niebuhr.¹⁴ Ranke was familiar with the practices of textual criticism because he was trained as a classical philologist. When he wrote the *Histories of the Romanic and Germanic Peoples* in 1824, he included a critique of renaissance historians in the appendix to his book. He aptly demonstrated that much of the historiography on early modern Europe had been led astray because it relied on traditional authorities instead of primary sources.¹⁵ Although this was considered an astonishing piece of work at the time – and earned Ranke an associate professorship at the University of Berlin in 1825 – his real historiographical achievements lie

elsewhere. For Ranke, source-criticism in itself could not reveal the meaning of history: this could be achieved only when the historian went beyond the collection of true facts about the past. In this respect, Ranke's conception of historical studies relied on a form of understanding which was not taken into consideration by critics like Droysen.

Ranke and the claim to be objective

The historians of the enlightenment had not only transformed history into a discipline that based its claims on empirical evidence, but had also reflected on the connections between the sources and historical knowledge. In this respect, Gatterer and Schlözer developed an approach that has been summarized as 'pragmatic' historiography. They thought that professional historians should comprehend the historical development as an effect that had to be explained by identifying appropriate causes. The course of historical events was supposed to show a system of causal connections that allowed the historian to form an account according to the notion of rational progress.¹⁶ But in the early nineteenth century widespread doubts concerning the ability of the human mind to discover the essence of reality made this conception increasingly unacceptable. Ranke held that subsuming particular facts under a general rule of rational progress did not lead to historical knowledge, but was rather mere philosophical speculation.¹⁷ He agreed with the enlightenment historians that history rested on a unified structure, but insisted that this structure could not be reconstructed by notions of progress and reason. As he explained in one of his lectures in the early 1830s, the historian had to develop a sense that was able to see a whole emerging from the particular elements of past reality without reducing it to formulas of abstract reasoning. The solution Ranke found already contained many of the elements that were later conceptualized by Droysen as '*Verstehen*' (understanding). In Ranke's conception, however, understanding was closely tied to his philosophical, religious and aesthetic convictions.¹⁸

Ranke's outlook on history was originally shaped by philosophical and religious studies during his student years. He was imbued with concerns that arose from his reading of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Schleiermacher (among others), who contributed to the philosophical underpinnings of Idealism and Romanticism.¹⁹ Ranke translated romantic concepts into the epistemology of history and, thereby, combined the empirical techniques of source-reading with an idealist point of view. According to the beliefs diffused by the romantic school, the mundane structures of the human mind were not capable of knowing the core of reality, since reality was thought of as being constituted by the eternal creativity of God. As a consequence, rather than apprehending it in a straightforward manner, the historian could deduce the divine origin of the past only when he established a common thread between historical phenomena. Thus for Ranke particular facts by themselves did not constitute historical knowledge because their hidden nature was only revealed in their relationship to others.

The attempt to find the overall connection between events was meant to provide access to the inner essence of history. In Ranke's opinion, the historian would

decipher the historical truth hidden within sources only when he recognized that facts which appeared to be unconnected were in reality harmoniously connected elements of general spiritual tendencies. He conceived the general content of the past as the work of spiritual forces which could be discovered indirectly by inferring from singular elements of historical reality to their common deeper ground. This conception presupposed the unique mental capacity of the historian. Ranke believed that one could develop mental capacities within oneself which reflected the spiritual essence behind historical events. He declared:

Since the character of all unity is spiritual, it can only be known by spiritual perception. This is based on the correspondence of the rules according to which the observing spirit proceeds, with those rules according to which the perceived object shows itself.²⁰

The concordance between knowing subject (the scholar) and the object to be known (the subject of study) was based on the idea of developing an approach specifically designed for historical studies. In order to discover the meaning of history, Ranke suggested combining the principles of philosophy and poetry. Although he agreed with its aims, Ranke blamed philosophy for constructing abstract categories that ignored the limits of the human mind and, therefore, only pretended to show the spiritual unity of reality. Poetry, on the other hand, was not concerned with the real aspects of life and nature, but adopting its procedures could prove fruitful. Ranke held that a poetic sense of synthesis could integrate the particular facts of the past into a whole that did not represent an abstract notion but a unity of its own kind.²¹ The poetic formation of an image of past reality presupposed a mental creativity within the historian and this corresponded with the hidden spiritual creativity he thought lay within historical phenomena. For Ranke, expressing the particular elements of history in an aesthetic form could reveal the hidden general content of the past because it reflected the spiritual principle of historical reality. Accordingly, science and art did not exclude each other, but were rather constructed as complementary elements of historical knowledge.²² Ranke explained:

One could be inclined to think that the beauty of form is only achievable at the cost of truth. If this was the case the idea of combining science and art would have to be abandoned as wrong. I am convinced of the opposite . . . A free and great form can only arise out of that which has been completely apprehended by the mind.²³

Of course he maintained the emphasis on documentary discrimination of facts and stressed the importance of a critical assessment of historical sources. But for Ranke, the meaning of historical facts could only emerge from what the historian's sense of poetic synthesis had in common with the spiritual essence of reality.

From Ranke's point of view, historical knowledge was thus the result of an interplay between subjective and objective forces. The historian should use his own creative capacities to seek what Ranke designated as the 'ideas' behind events. But

rather than rendering historical knowledge subjective, Ranke asserted that the sense of poetic synthesis was influenced by the spiritual content it was supposed to reconstruct. For him, disclosing the historical ideas behind past events enabled one to develop a sense of the general structure of history. By producing a coherent image of the past the historian would purge himself from the mere subjective elements of his perception and form his mind according to the general truth he was discovering. As Ranke's conviction of the spiritual content of history rested on his belief in the divine origin of reality, he conceived of historical research as a way to harmonize the self and the world as it was created by God.²⁴ 'When we remove the shell from things and turn out what is essential in them, it happens that in our own being, essence, spiritual life, soul and the breath of god take wing.'²⁵ Conceiving history from that point of view led Ranke to believe in the objectivity of historiography. For him, historical knowledge was achieved if the historian transformed his subjective point of view into an objective reverberation of ideas hidden underneath the appearances of historical changes. According to his religious and philosophical convictions he was convinced of the possibility of submerging the subject into the object by the means of historical understanding:

My happiness is to observe the world, past and present, from this point on which I stand, and to absorb it into myself, insofar as it is congruent with me . . . Often one is hardly aware of having a personality any more. One no longer has an ego. The eternal father of all things, who gives life to all, draws us to Him without resistance.²⁶

Ranke's rejection of abstract definitions prevented him from casting his reflections into an elaborated theory of historical knowledge. Apart from occasional statements in essays and letters he developed his practice of source-reading and understanding within his empirical historical writing. Droysen's distorted picture of Ranke as being uniquely concerned with source-criticism can partly be explained by Ranke's reluctance to spell out his theoretical assumptions. But more important than his silence in this respect are the differences between Ranke's and Droysen's historical approaches themselves.

Droysen and the theory of historical understanding

Droysen conceived of academic historiography as having a social task that consisted in forming a subject capable of taking on the responsibilities of a modern citizen.²⁷ He was convinced that the study of history could change the habits of his contemporaries if it was not left to antiquarians who were only concerned with collecting records from a distant past. For Droysen, the sources themselves could not yield historical knowledge; they stood for the past rather than what he conceptualized as history in its full meaning:

Those who consider it to be the highest task of the historian that he does not add anything of his own thinking, but simply lets the facts speak for themselves, do

not see that the facts themselves do not speak except through the words of someone who has seized and understood them.²⁸

Droysen considered sources to be the indispensable basis of history; but in his eyes, they only revealed their significance if they were interpreted by the historian.

Droysen pointed out that historical knowledge had to be based on traces of the past that were still accessible in the contemporary world.²⁹ He proposed classifying these traces according to the character of their relation to the present. In his conception, the term 'remains' (*Überreste*) encompassed all kinds of traces of human actions that had not been intended to make the past known to the future. 'Remains' had been originally part of the daily life of the past without being designed for the purpose of historical tradition. According to Droysen, institutions and works of art, for example, could deliver historical information, but their existence did not depend on the intention of letting people in the future know what had happened in the past. 'Sources' (*Quellen*) in the proper sense, on the contrary, were the result of an effort to constitute historical memory. Any kind of writing on contemporary or recent affairs, from saga to chronicle, originated from the intention of recording events for times to come. 'Sources' in Droysen's usage of the term did not accidentally reflect the past, but already translated it into some kind of a meaningful story that was supposed to be transmitted to future generations.³⁰

In both cases, however, the records required further work:

The result of critical source-reading by itself would not be anything like living reality; the bricks of a building put side by side are only the bricks not the building . . . they are only particular elements which do not give an image of the whole.³¹

Both have their difficulties: 'remains' reflect the purpose for which they were made but reveal nothing about their function and influence within a larger context, while 'sources' – though designed to establish clear meaning – are construed from a specific point of view, one that is entangled in the beliefs and aims of the writer of the past. Only when brought into an interpretative frame-work set up from a retrospective, historical point of view can 'remains' and 'sources' be turned into what Droysen understood to be historical information. He believed that the perspective of the present on the past enabled the historian to overcome the limits of the sources by integrating them into an interpretation of history.³²

According to Droysen, rather than restricting themselves to the literal meaning of the sources, historians should seek to uncover the mental content embodied in the facts and events documented by written texts, monuments and so on. In his conception, history was interested in aspects of reality which had been shaped by the human mind. Historians, therefore, should be concerned with the results of thoughts and plans of the past which had found expression in historical actions.³³ Despite this interest in the way historical actors thought, Droysen distinguished between historical interpretation and psychological interpretation. Whereas the

latter focused on the personal motives of individuals, historical interpretation was concerned with larger historical forces. Understanding actions psychologically meant tracing them back to the character and personality of individuals; historical understanding, as Droysen explained, was based on the belief that the human will depends on the world of which it is part and, therefore, has to be perceived as something beyond the mere outcome of psychological motives. Droysen was convinced that historical epistemology could be based on the existence of a chain of general ideas behind individual thinking, which gave particular thoughts and motives their meaning.³⁴ This concept was the key to the hermeneutic character of Droysen's theory of history and reading sources. Understanding history meant interpreting particular phenomena as part of a whole, a whole that was constructed by the historian in order to determine their historical significance.³⁵

Droysen asked himself whether presupposing a general connection of ideas within history could be methodologically justified. In his eyes, the present had to be perceived as the current result of the historical development of the past. For that reason, he did not accept the charge that the historian's assumption of a general spiritual content behind individual historical phenomena rested on mere subjective imagination. Rather, he argued that the capacities the historian employed to reconstruct the past could not be alien to their subject since they were as much conditioned by the process of history as anything else. Indeed, the idea of a general spiritual development buried within the traces of the past, which historians formed during the process of interpretation, was itself the consequence of historical tradition. 'The historian's question is the result of the entire mental content that we have unconsciously collected within ourselves and transformed into our own subjective world.'³⁶ Since studying history meant using mental capacities which were the result of history, historical knowledge could rely on a tacit connection between the historian's perspective and history itself.

This conception of understanding also affected the aim of historical studies. If historiography was unconsciously shaped by history, historical scholarship was not only the discovery of the past as it 'essentially' had been. It was also an effort to deepen the capacity for historical knowledge by revealing its relation with historical development.³⁷ In this respect, Droysen's endeavour departed significantly from Ranke. Whereas Ranke had proposed reconstructing history according to an eternal divine principle, Droysen wanted to establish an evolutionary principle of history that could make progress possible.³⁸ The historical ideas behind the individual phenomena of the past were for him expressions of 'ethical powers' (*sittliche Mächte*) embodied in the form of language, art, religion, law and the state. While interpreting the records of the past, the historian was supposed to follow their progressive development:

The interpretation of ideas . . . demands . . . one not only to see: this is how the idea of the state, the church, the law etc. has been perceived at a certain point but also: this is how they progressed until then, this is the point they reached within the overall movement of ideas, because only within this continuity they can be understood.³⁹

Whereas Ranke denied the possibility of discerning the spiritual tendency within historical phenomena as a progressive development, for Droysen this was a decisive part of his effort to reveal the hidden relationship between the subject (the scholar) and object of historical knowledge (the topic being studied).

Droysen's determination to study the development of ethical powers was closely tied to what he conceived as the purpose of historical scholarship. If the mind of the present was constituted by the development of historical ideas over time, and if those ideas were by nature progressive, historical knowledge was meant to reveal a wider principle of historical evolution: it was not only significant for knowing the past, but it could also offer orientation within the contemporary world. By revealing the historical nature of one's own thinking, Droysen hoped to give the individual who studied the past a sense of his place in his own time, and to stimulate historical development through the enhancement of social and collective powers. The wider goal of historical inquiry was to make the subject of historical knowledge aware of the historical meaning of his thoughts and ideas, in order to develop a sense of his position and function within a historical continuum stretching into the future.⁴⁰ For Droysen, understanding history meant recognizing that selfhood was constituted by an evolutionary principle of history which – once it was fully grasped – enabled the individual to transcend his current situation in order to carry on the tradition of progress. Historical studies were meant to highlight this continuity as the essence of history, with the purpose of ensuring its further development: 'The idea itself strives to an ever new expression, its existence is to become and to grow . . . Its deployment is the becoming and growing of history, history is the progressing . . . growth of the ideas.'⁴¹ By revealing the presence of the past within the contemporary way of studying history, Droysen thus claimed that the acquisition of historical knowledge was ultimately driven by the same notion of progress as historical development itself. As a consequence, from Droysen's point of view, understanding history was synonymous with eventually fulfilling the task of advancing the cause of mankind.⁴²

For that reason, Droysen severely criticized the proposal of historians like Henry Thomas Buckle who wanted to model historical knowledge on the natural sciences.⁴³ According to Droysen, the general content within particular historical phenomena could not be cast into a law of history that resembled its counterparts in physics or chemistry. Rather than causing the reproduction of a fixed set of occurrences, he conceived general ideas as being constituted by a constant evolution and which, as a result, could not be comprehended as a permanent structure. Droysen believed that understanding history would help the task of revealing both true knowledge of the past and self-knowledge by fusing them within a human science. In that respect, ideas similar to Droysen's were enlarged and systematized by Wilhelm Dilthey.

Dilthey and understanding as the core of the human sciences

Dilthey combined a strongly developed sense for philosophical questions with extensive research on the history of literature, historiography and general intellectual history. His main interest was to develop a scientific foundation for the humanities,

coining the term '*Geisteswissenschaften*' (literally translated as: 'sciences of spirit') with his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* in 1883.⁴⁴ Throughout his work he relied on notions of the German concept of *Bildung* which were already present in the approaches Ranke and Droysen developed. The meaning of *Bildung* is not covered by literal translations like 'education'. Rather than describing a process of acquiring a pre-given catalogue of knowledge or skills, *Bildung* aimed at the combination of knowledge and personal self-formation that was expressed by the notion of understanding.⁴⁵ Accordingly, Ranke did not simply want to establish objective knowledge of the past, but believed that historical studies changed the mental capacities of individuals. Droysen held that history had an educational responsibility which surpassed the discovery of the truth about the past, because it aimed to orient his fellow citizens in the contemporary world. In both of these approaches, gaining historical knowledge was linked with self-formation because it developed the individual's capacity for self-determined thinking and acting. As such, along with neo-humanist intellectuals like Wilhelm von Humboldt, key proponents of German history turned *Bildung* into an ideal conduct of life that was independent from external constraints because it followed an internally motivated concordance with the principles of reality.⁴⁶

Dilthey elaborated on these characteristics of historical studies in a theory of the humanities which was supposed to justify their independent existence as a 'science'. He argued that the natural sciences constructed an object by abstracting from their own perspective, whereas the human sciences focused on the subjective dimensions of the experience of objects. Dilthey thus made a distinction between 'understanding', which was the appropriate method for the human sciences, and 'explanation', a method used in the natural sciences:

We explain nature, but we understand the life of the soul . . . This determines a huge difference in the methods we use when we study . . . history and society from the methods which have led to the knowledge of nature.⁴⁷

For Dilthey, understanding could rely on a mental relationship inherent in the experience of living itself. Whereas the natural sciences approached their objects from the outside, the human sciences focused on the idea that every experience rested on the existence of a mental frame inside the human subject.⁴⁸ Having an experience presupposed a web of beliefs, ideas, sentiments which gave each particular instance of experience its meaning. The method of understanding used this idea in two ways. First, the interpretation of the historical world was itself an experience which relied on the mental frame of the interpreting subject. Second, understanding treated the traces of the past as the 'objectification' of particular experiences of others which were themselves related to an inner mental frame.⁴⁹ The process of understanding was designed to show that the two forms of mental composition were connected.

Dilthey differentiated between different forms of *Verstehen*: elementary understanding read the expressions of mental life backwards from the outcome to its source; re-experiencing, on the other hand, constituted a higher form of understanding. His explanation of re-experiencing relied on a circular form of reasoning: according to Dilthey, any mental experience represented a part of the

psychological whole of a subject. Every particular experience derived its meaning from the overall composition of a mind and, in turn, every instance of experience had significance for the whole. Since the historian had no direct access to the mental composition of those he studied, he had to start by taking his own life-experience as a point of comparison. From there, the meaning of an expression of experience of others could then be inferred by way of analogy. Using one's own ideas, convictions and sentiments as a starting-point, re-experiencing meant reconstructing the web of experience of others by enforcing or weakening the elements of one's own inner being and by critically comparing the other person's expression of mental experience with one's own manner of expressing a supposedly similar experience.⁵⁰ Although this process was not supposed to ever accomplish an actual recreation of another person's mind, Dilthey held that it enabled one to understand the historical traces of the human world.

For Dilthey, the circle of reasoning in understanding and re-experiencing was not a vicious circle one had to get out of. Rather, he argued that the mental origin of historical life should be treated as a part of the tradition which had eventually formed the historian's own contemporary situation including his perspective on other minds. Consequently, as in Ranke's and in Droysen's conceptions, the subject of historical knowledge and inquiry was not to be construed as external or separated from its object of study. Rather, understanding meant recognizing that subject and object were internally connected through history. Understanding particular historical expressions of the soul was supposed to activate the common features of the human mind within oneself. Eventually, this would lead to the comprehension of a general structure of historical continuity which Dilthey summarized as the 'objective spirit'. Because subject and object appertained to the same sphere of human activity (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) within the 'objective spirit', the effort of understanding was already a part of what was to be understood.⁵¹ Dilthey declared:

From this world of objective spirit the self receives sustenance from the earliest childhood, it is the medium in which the understanding of other people and their expressions take place. For everything in which the mind has objectified itself contains something held in common by the I and the Thou.⁵²

Accordingly, the circle of understanding, for Dilthey, constituted the possibility of becoming aware of the interrelationship between the present and the past which determined the meaning of one's own thinking. Instead of trying to recognize the presence of God in one's own soul (as Ranke) or to prove the tradition of historical progress (as Droysen), Dilthey wanted to develop a system of the human sciences in order to show the historicity of the human mind.

Conclusion

Within nineteenth-century history, the notion of *Verstehen* brought together two different attitudes towards history which had long been separated in earlier

historiographical traditions. Antiquarians had been concerned with collecting remnants of past times, while philosophical historians had dealt with the general sense of historical development.⁵³ Around 1800, scholars began to combine the quest for the meaning of history with a need for reliable documents which could back up their arguments. Historians adopted the techniques of textual criticism from other disciplines to base their accounts on verifiable facts, and they developed new ways of integrating them into a coherent account of the past.

As a consequence, historiography increasingly had to sustain its claims by documentary research. And at the same time, leading scholars like Ranke and Droysen conceptualized history as the embodiment of spiritual forces beneath the particular historical facts. The spiritual content of history was not concerned with individual psychological motives, but rather with the historical ideas which dominated the thoughts and beliefs of an age. It was the business of historians to find the common mental ground which was taken as the origin of past events, by relying on their capacity to detect connections between the facts as they were documented in the historical record. In the eyes of Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, the historian's endeavour was justified because the subjective mental forms used when constructing historical ideas were themselves determined by the tradition of the past that was under scrutiny. The emphasis on *Verstehen* in the historical thought of the nineteenth century has often been denounced as embodying a naïve theory of empathy which supposed that historians could feel themselves into the past by effacing their own subjectivity. Yet, the aim of historical understanding – as it was conceived by their main proponents – was not mental contemporaneity or self-forgetfulness, but rather to combine the acquisition of factual knowledge with a way of deepening and forming the scholar's selfhood.

Understanding and source-criticism had formed the backbone of historical scholarship in European and North American historiography since the beginning of its academic institutionalization in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ One of the most famous theoretical reflections on the issues involved in interpreting historical documents was presented in the 1930s by Robin G. Collingwood, who developed his concept of re-enacting the thoughts of the past by carefully reviewing his predecessors of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ From the early 1960s onward, however, concerted efforts to transform academic historiography into a historical social science struck a serious blow to the notion of understanding as the core of historical studies. Reform-minded social historians were critical of the way in which the concept of *Verstehen* had prompted generations of scholars to be uniquely concerned with highbrow intellectual history, and had barred them from taking the social contexts of ideas properly into account.

Critics like Arthur Danto, Louis Mink and Hayden White on the other hand insisted that historical studies should be independent of the theoretical efforts advanced in the social sciences and recast 'understanding' as the inescapable narrative dimension of historical accounts.⁵⁶ Even though today only few historians would claim to interpret historical records in the tradition of Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, many of their ideas either survived or have recently been reinvented by historians who adopt and practise anthropological and micro-historical

approaches. The methodological call to reconstruct past events from the perspective of historical actors, and to deduce the meaning of their particular practices from the whole of their culture (rather than assuming a social structure of which contemporaries were not aware) still points back to the concept of combining source-criticism and hermeneutics as it was developed within the historical studies of the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 Johann Gustav Droysen to Wilhelm Arendt, 20 March 1857, in *Briefwechsel*, ed. Rudolf Hübner, vol. 2 1851–1884, Berlin. Leipzig: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1929, p. 442.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 A critical and complete edition of Droysen's *Historik*, his key text on the theory of history, was first published only in 1977. Even then it might be useful to consult the English translation of an earlier version, published as J.G. Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History*, trans. E.B. Andrews, Boston: Ginn, 1897. All quotes in this chapter are from the critical edition: J.G. Droysen, *Historik. Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen (1857). Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen (1857/1858) und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung (1882)*, (ed.) Peter Ley, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977, pp. 11f.
- 4 See A. Grafton, *The Footnote. A Curious History*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 73ff.
- 5 Lord Acton called Ranke 'the real originator of the heroic study of records'. Lord Acton, 'Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History', in J.E.E.D. Acton, *Lectures on Modern History*, London and Glasgow: Collins, 1960, p. 22.
- 6 Another important author in the foundation of the hermeneutic tradition was Wilhelm von Humboldt, who inspired especially Droysen. See among others T. Prüfer, 'Wilhelm von Humboldts "Rhetorische Hermeneutik"', in Prüfer and D. Fulda (eds), *Faktenglaube und fiktionales Wissen. Zum Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Kunst in der Moderne*, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1996, pp. 127–166.
- 7 See U. Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung. Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1991, pp. 351–352.
- 8 See in general B. Neveu, 'L'érudition ecclésiastique du XVIIe siècle et la nostalgie de l'Antiquité chrétienne', in his *Érudition et religion aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris: Michel, 1994, pp. 333–363.
- 9 See Muhlack, *Vorgeschichte*, pp. 371–373.
- 10 For a more detailed account of the development of source-criticism as a reaction to the systematic doubt against historical knowledge see M. Völkel, 'Pyrrhonismus' und 'fides historica'. *Die Entwicklung der deutschen Methodologie unter dem Gesichtspunkt der historischen Skepsis*, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1987.
- 11 See H.W. Blanke, *Historiographiegeschichte als Historik*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991, pp. 156–163.
- 12 See U. Muhlack, 'Historie und Philologie', in H.E. Bödecker (ed.), *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, p. 67.
- 13 Ranke says (in the second edition of his book): 'Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beigemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.' L. v. Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, 2nd edn, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1874, p. vii. The English translation is taken from the extract in F. Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*, London: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 55–62.
- 14 On Niebuhr see G. Walter, *Niebuhrs Forschung*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993.

- 15 Comparing different accounts to each other Ranke especially showed that Guicciardini's *History of Italy* of 1508 which had been taken as a reliable source consisted for the most part not only of copies from other authors, but that Guicciardini had also changed and invented historical facts. See Ranke, 'Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber', in Ranke, *Geschichten*, pp. 1–39.
- 16 See T. Prüfer, *Die Bildung der Geschichte. Friedrich Schiller und die Anfänge der modernen Geschichtswissenschaft*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2003, pp. 267ff.
- 17 See L. Krieger, *Ranke. The Meaning of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 15.
- 18 As he declared in one of his letters of the time against his critics: 'That I am supposed to lack philosophical and religious interest is ridiculous since this is just . . . what drove me to historical research.' Ranke to Heinrich Ritter, 6 August 1830, in Ranke, *Das Briefwerk*, Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1949, p. 216.
- 19 See especially C. Hinrichs, *Ranke und die Geschichtstheologie der Goethezeit*, Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1954, pp. 119–120, 146–147; S. Backs, *Dialektisches Denken in Rankes Geschichtsschreibung bis 1854*, Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1985, pp. 43ff.
- 20 L. v. Ranke, 'Idee der Universalhistorie', in Ranke, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, ed. V. Dotterweich and W.P. Fuchs, Munich and Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1975, p. 78.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–83.
- 22 See D. Fulda, *Wissenschaft aus Kunst. Die Entstehung der modernen Geschichtsschreibung 1760–1860*, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1996, p. 407; J. Süßmann, *Geschichtsschreibung oder Roman? Zur Konstitutionslogik von Geschichtserzählungen zwischen Schiller und Ranke (1780–1824)*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000, pp. 215f.; P. Müller, 'Wissenspoesie und Historie. Rankes Literaturgeschichte Italiens als Rekonfiguration ästhetischer Geschichtsphilosophie', *German Studies Review* 29 (2006), 1–20.
- 23 L. Ranke, *Französische Geschichte, vornehmlich im sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, 4th edn, vol. 5, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1877, p. 6.
- 24 See W. Hardtwig, 'Geschichtsreligion – Wissenschaft als Arbeit – Objektivität. Der Historismus in neuer Sicht', *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), 8–12.
- 25 Ranke to Anton Richter, 13 April 1823, in Leopold von Ranke, *Gesamtausgabe des Briefwechsels: vol. 1, 1813–1825*, (eds) U. Muhlack and O. Ramonat, Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2007, p. 337; see Krieger, *Meaning*, p. 10.
- 26 Ranke to Heinrich Ranke, 30 November 1832, in Ranke, *Das Briefwerk*, pp. 252f. In an earlier letter to his brother Ranke stated: 'Real joy is to forget oneself, to give oneself, to become more conscious of oneself in the larger whole'. Ranke to Heinrich Ranke, 20 and 21 November 1828, in *ibid.*, p. 175; see Krieger, *Meaning*, p. 14.
- 27 See H. White, 'Droysen's Historik. Historical Writing as a Bourgeois Science', in White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 83–103.
- 28 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 218.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 9f., 67.
- 30 See J.G. Droysen, 'Zur Quellenkritik', in his *Texte zur Geschichtstheorie. Mit ungedruckten Materialien zur 'Historik'*, (ed.) G. Birtsch and J. Rüsen, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972, pp. 60–66; Droysen, *Historik*, pp. 71–100. Droysen established a third category that designated all the traces of the past which expressed the intention of preserving events but, at the same time, had a practical function within the contemporary affairs of their origin. Droysen called them 'monuments', a category that comprised for example legal documents and diplomatic reports.
- 31 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 166.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
- 34 See *ibid.*, pp. 187–194.

- 35 See H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge der philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 6th edn, Tübingen: Mohr, 1990, pp. 216–222.
- 36 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 107. Compare also the later remark: ‘I would not be able to think an idea that has not already won expression . . . We have within ourselves all the ideas that are thinkable, since they are thinkable only insofar they have become, as they are the result of history.’ *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 37 See J. Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1993, pp. 254–255.
- 38 This side of Droysen’s conception of history was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. See Rüsen, *Konfigurationen*, pp. 254–255.
- 39 Droysen, *Historik*, pp. 211–212.
- 40 See White, *Droysen’s Historik*, pp. 95–96.
- 41 Droysen, *Historik*, p. 201.
- 42 See *ibid.*, pp. 363–366.
- 43 See the introduction of H.T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 2 vols, London: J.W. Parker, 1857.
- 44 In the following I do not discuss whether different stages in Dilthey’s intellectual career should be distinguished. For the purpose of this essay I follow the arguments of R.A. Makreel, *Dilthey. Philosopher of the Human Studies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 7–8.
- 45 See R. Koselleck, ‘On the Anthropological and Semantic Structure of Bildung’, in Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 170.
- 46 See R. Vierhaus, ‘Bildung’, in O. Brunner, W. Conze, R. Koselleck (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1972, vol. 1, p. 529.
- 47 W. Dilthey, ‘Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie’, in Dilthey, *Die geistige Welt. Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens*, Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1924, p. 144.
- 48 See *ibid.*, pp. 140–142.
- 49 See W. Dilthey, ‘Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik’, in his *Die geistige Welt*, p. 236.
- 50 See W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1927, pp. 214–215.
- 51 See Makreel, *Dilthey*, p. 314–322.
- 52 Dilthey, *Aufbau*, p. 208. Compare C.R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 162.
- 53 See A. Momigliano, ‘Ancient History and the Antiquarian’, in Momigliano, *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici*, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1955, pp. 67–106.
- 54 For the significance of Ranke’s methodology for historians in the USA see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 21–46.
- 55 Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment should not be confused with Dilthey’s concept of re-experiencing. In opposition to Dilthey Collingwood restricted understanding on the re-enactment of acts of thought which he defined as separate from the overall composition of the mind. It bears some resemblance with Dilthey’s definition of a notional expression of life. For Collingwood’s judgement on Dilthey see R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. edn, ed. J. van der Dussen, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 171–176.
- 56 See for example White, *Content*.

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