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7

What is Intellectual History Now?

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It is always difficult to explain what one does for a living; still more so when one is asked in so crisp a manner, and with such apparent expectation of definitive response, as in the question 'What is intellectual history now?' I cannot hope to be comprehensive, and my answer will necessarily reflect my own particular specialism and interests. However, I shall attempt to be at least articulate in my reply; and I shall begin by saying that the question seems to me to involve in fact two questions: one, 'What is intellectual history *now*?' (as opposed to *then*); and two, 'What is *intellectual* history *now*?' (as opposed to any other kind of history). As we shall see, these two questions cannot be disentangled; for the very same history of intellectual history over the past few decades which has seen such a reinvigoration of the field has at the same time brought into question the distinctive boundaries of that field.

One might, indeed, be happy with a blurring of the distinction between intellectual history and other forms of history. One very distinguished intellectual historian, William J. Bouwsma, recently urged that we prefer the term 'cultural history' over 'intellectual history', in that the latter seems to suggest the existence of some high thing, the 'intellect' or 'intellectual activity', set over and above the baser aspects of living – and thus of an outstanding value – the study of which is itself an exalted intellectual pursuit done only by serious intellectuals. Whereas, he points out, thought or intellectual activity is involved at many levels of human individual and social life, and so it is impossible to skim off an 'intellectual' history of 'ideas' from a broader history of culture.¹ So: intellectual history or sociocultural history? – the question

has been posed before;² but I am not convinced that one should answer it by submerging the identity of the former in the all-enveloping waters of the latter, nor by acquiescing (at least entirely) in formulations such as ‘the “new” intellectual-cultural history’.³ We may admit that intellectual history, taken pure and *per se*, might have something of an image problem, at least among fellow historians: nothing is more familiar than the claim of some of our colleagues that we study only a limited range of ‘high’ texts, nor their irony when they tell us that they, unlike us, are not clever enough to do the history of thought and therefore content themselves with more humble enquiries. But I think it is possible to deflect these criticisms while still insisting on the distinctive character of intellectual history: not as some disembodied metahistory of thought, but as a discipline with distinctive *concerns* of its own. For as I shall hope to show, there is a sense in which the history of thought cannot avoid a ‘thoughtful’ – or, let us say, philosophical – appreciation of its object; and thus *intellectual history* must be in some sense *intellectual* history. I shall try to defend this idea at the end.

Meanwhile, let us address the first of my questions – ‘What is intellectual history *now*?’ – and start with the point that intellectual history has come a long way from the isolated study of the ‘great ideas’ of ‘great thinkers’: that is, a history of human thought or thinking *as distinct from* human action or doings.⁴ This sort of history took thinking out of the teleology of individual human agents and generated a history of ideas with a tendency to a teleology all their own. This history had a certain grandeur, but it was unclear in what dimension and in what time these ideas were supposed to exist – unless one were unafraid to posit the timeless present of their Platonic originals; and further problems accordingly came in mapping this story of ideas back onto human story or history in general. On the one hand, a teleology of ideas tended to support a conception of a teleology of history itself. We can see this very plainly in Carr’s sixth lecture on ‘What is History?’ entitled ‘The Widening Horizon’. Having had little to say about intellectual history up to this point, he tells us here – in an extraordinary neo-Hegelian flight – that the pivotal figures in the history of modern man are Descartes, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and Freud, viewed as innovating in the self-consciousness of reason and thereby innovating in history.⁵ But, on the other hand, it is unclear whether Carr wants to say that these ‘great thinkers’ actually moved history on themselves, or whether they are symptomatic of a history which is moving on anyway. Thus the history of modern man is said to ‘begin’ with Descartes, but Hegel and Marx are

the ‘representative thinkers’ of a transition from the eighteenth century to the modern world.

The work of R.G. Collingwood, about whom Carr had such mixed feelings in his first lecture on ‘What is History?’, played an important role, at least within the Anglophone historiographical tradition, in the development of a different way of involving human thought in human history. Heir to another Hegelianism through the British idealist tradition, drawing on T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley, Collingwood famously insisted that all history is the history of thought, thus confounding any supposed distinction between the history of thought and the history of deeds.⁶ For Collingwood, we cannot understand any human action or production without an understanding of the thought involved in it, and so we cannot write any history which is not a work of interpretation. It is this that alarmed Carr, of course, since it seemed to tip the balance of history too far in the direction of interpretation and consequently to lose that constructive equilibrium with facts which, Carr supposed, was of the essence of history.⁷ From the point of view of intellectual history, however, we ought to notice the converse effect; that thought, equally, becomes involved in action and production and consequently in the historical time of historical agents.

We do not, therefore, have to think of intellectual activity as somehow ‘above’ the rest of human activity in the way that the head is above the body. The basic understanding of thought as involved in action and production has been with us for a long time. None the less, Bouwsma is right to the extent that the way we figure this involvement – the whole way in which we think about human thought – has changed enormously over the decades since Carr took issue with Collingwood. Speaking very roughly, we might identify two major trajectories of that change: one is through the study of language or discourse and its relation to human action and agency; the other is through our increasingly complex conception of the manifold ways in which human beings represent their world and themselves to themselves and to others, and in which these representations inform and are informed by practice. Although originating from diverse historiographical traditions, these two trajectories are not mutually independent, as we shall see. In particular, questions of textuality and its limits have come to play an important role in both.

I

So let me begin with the question of the *language* which had traditionally been taken to ‘embody’ or to ‘express’ the thoughts or ideas of thinkers.

This concern was addressed in the early 1960s by a group of scholars working on the history of political thought, who have come to be known collectively as the 'Cambridge School', investigating the relationship between language, thought, agency and time. One direction, explored particularly by Quentin Skinner, took advantage of work which was being done in linguistic theory in the 1950s and 1960s by John Austin and John Searle.⁸ Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words*,⁹ developed and elaborated by Searle in *Speech Acts*,¹⁰ argued that the function of words is not limited to saying how things are, that is, to an indicative or propositional mode (the 'locutionary' dimension); nor, correspondingly, is making sense of words limited to establishing propositional meaning. Rather, beyond simply saying things, words can in specific contexts be used to *do* things. That is, the speaking is or can be a doing, an action in itself: and thus beyond the 'locutionary' dimension of words, we have to recognize both an 'illocutionary' dimension and a 'perlocutionary' dimension. The 'illocutionary' dimension is what a speaker is doing *in* using certain specific words. The 'perlocutionary' dimension is what a speaker is doing *through* or *by* using specific words. Thus a perlocutionary act, by definition, surpasses or goes beyond the text. But an illocutionary act, also identified by Searle and by Skinner with the notion of an author's *intention* in writing or saying certain words, is contained within the text itself.¹¹ It is the 'point' of the act (text) from the perspective of the author.¹² This kind of intentionality, Skinner postulated, is recoverable in reading. It contrasts with an author's putative intention *to*, which stands outside the text as part of a psychological portrait and which may well be irrecoverable.

Identification or recovery of a particular utterance as a particular illocutionary act depends on an awareness of its particular speech situation or *context*. We can only know what an author was *doing* in writing a particular text if we know the circumstances of that doing. The result was a method which argues that to understand texts for the specific speech acts that they are, we need to understand the historical context in which they were uttered. As I shall describe in more detail later, 'context' can be multidimensional: a specific political situation, a social or cultural milieu, an institutional context like a courtroom. For our analysis at present, however, what we are concerned with is the historical *linguistic context* (which may be implicated in diverse ways in the other types of context I have mentioned) – what other people were *saying* at the time and the conventions governing that saying. In the background to this idea, in addition to the work of Austin and Searle, stands the work of the later Wittgenstein and his notion, elaborated in the *Philosophical*

Investigations, of the 'language game'.¹³ This is the idea that language can be seen as a game governed by certain rules and conventions. These rules dictate what counts as a valid linguistic move and what does not, which is the same as dictating what makes sense and what does not. Without a knowledge of the game and its conventions, particular linguistic acts are completely meaningless (we might imagine not knowing anything about cricket and trying to make sense of the actions of both players and spectators) because we cannot grasp the illocutionary dimension of a text or what the author *intended to do* in writing that text: what was the *point* of the text, in plainer language. Its full sense eludes us.

As will now be clear, one of the fundamental assumptions of intellectual history as a history of utterances within a language (understood as a language game) is that a particular piece of language is no longer seen as the *expression* of thought. The old intellectual history as a history of ideas carried the implication that the idea stood independently of the words that expressed it, such that it could have been expressed in different words, another book. It made the relation of the ideas to the language and the book contingent. Intellectual history as a history of language in use instead sees language usage as constitutive of thought: to use words in a particular way within a particular linguistic horizon just *is* to 'think'. There is no thought behind the words, that is, which can have a history of its own independent of the historically specific activity of language users. This has led some of its practitioners to reject an intellectual history not only in the sense of a history of ideas, but even in the sense of a history of concepts, the German *Begriffsgeschichte*.¹⁴ How someone conceives of something is what linguistic connections and moves they make – no more. There is no supra-linguistic 'concept' available in some abstract dimension for the historian's attention.

Thus a key element of intellectual history practised in this way will be the recovery of past 'ways of speaking', which is a precondition for the adequate characterization of such linguistic moves. The idea of intellectual history as the recovery of specific language games – in other words, the discursive context – is perhaps more associated with the work of J.G.A. Pocock, although the commitment is common to both Pocock and Skinner.¹⁵ When intellectual historians talk of a 'language' in this way, they are not primarily referring to the natural languages – French, English, Latin, and so on – although the existence of different natural languages is undoubtedly an important consideration, as is the history of the practice of translation. Rather, what they are concerned with is the different ways of talking or modes of discourse, what we might call

idioms or rhetorics, within natural languages. Although Skinner and Pocock have worked mainly on languages of political thought, the notion can be extended fruitfully to modes of discourse in other domains; for example, natural science or theology. We reconstruct these idioms in the past from groups of texts which all rely on the same standardized formulae and commonplaces; which share the same grammar, vocabulary and rhetoric. In this way we might identify the *language of natural rights*, the *language of Aristotelian science*, and so on.¹⁶ Although this approach is primarily concerned with texts, it does not exclude certain visual vocabularies: the iconography of a certain figure, such as Justice or Fortune, can be treated as part of the range of reference of the term within a particular language or rhetoric; conversely, texts can be used to elucidate iconography.¹⁷

Languages or discourses conceived in this way are *not* limited to elite productions, a few 'great texts'. The great texts are written in idioms or rhetorics which may be shared with many not-so-great texts of the most varied provenance: occasional pamphlets, cheap novels, newspapers – they are all grist to the intellectual historian's mill. For although the 'great texts' may and will always fascinate, they did not invent the languages in which they speak (albeit they may move them on or subvert them in some way), and hence making sense of what they are about can never be limited to their study alone. Reconstructing those languages involves intellectual historians in other areas of history, political, social or cultural, which form the milieu or the *context* within which that language was deployed. Historians may also – depending on their focus – need to investigate the more minute context of a particular event or series of events within that broader context in order to recover the intentionality of a specific text or series of texts. Thus, an historian of early modern natural science may attempt to situate the early modern philosophical discourse of nature in relation to early modern cultures of collection and curiosity cabinets, of gardening, of courtly display; an historian of political thought will attempt to recover the precise political situation prevailing at the time of a particular text.

The contextual approach to understanding intellectual productions does not posit any simple, one-way relationship between a specific discourse and a specific milieu, nor between a specific text and its specific occasional context. To take an example of the first type, familiar from my own studies: the artificial Latin of the scholastic has to be understood as developed and perpetuated within the specific institutional context of the medieval universities and their formation. This Latin is not a neutral tool of intellectual enquiry, containing as it does within itself a commitment

to a specific (Aristotelian) understanding of knowledge and reality. This commitment is itself connected with the demands of academic disciplines, within newly institutionalized structures of teaching and learning, for authoritative theoretical or scientific books. Thus scholastic-Aristotelian form and scholastic-Aristotelian content – what was said *and* the language for saying it – developed together within the context of the formal practices of the universities, the language becoming increasingly technical with the refinement of theory. And as this language became increasingly technical, it also became increasingly unintelligible to outsiders and increasingly the exclusive preserve and practice of a caste of scholars, masters and clerics, a marker of status and of the boundaries of an intellectual community.¹⁸ By the same token, defending those boundaries when they came to be questioned by humanists and by the new science was not simply a matter of language. Among other things it was a matter of professional identity, social prestige – and money.¹⁹

The relations between specific texts and the specific occasional contexts in which they may be intended as interventions should be understood as equally complex and mutually determining. Any prospective agent is limited not only in what he or she can conceive, but also in what he or she can legitimate or justify, by the shared horizons of expectation implicit in a particular language. Because of the link between public discourse and public action, an agent proposing an innovative course of action would necessarily also need to engage in one of several possible linguistic strategies (the most common of which is attempting to redescribe the proposed action within the normative terminology of the prevailing discourse).²⁰ Thus in these situations too, language shapes extralinguistic action even while the contrary is also true: the boundary between language and action, the discursive and the non-discursive, is always a *negotiated* one.

I will return to these strategies of negotiation (and control). Meanwhile, I want to focus on an issue which has been raised concerning this methodology insofar as it insists on the centrality of the figure of the language *user* in recovering the meaning of acts of language usage, that is, texts. We remember that the original move was to take intellectual history away from a teleology of great ideas or great thoughts by implicating it in the teleology of individual speakers and writers. It supposes someone who is actually using the words – remember Austin's title, *How to Do Things with Words* – as if the words are the instruments of the doer, someone who therefore stands outside language and is not him- or herself linguistically constituted. However, both the centrality of the author or speaker, and the idea that words can be used according to

authorial intention, have been subject to extensive challenge from the direction of the European continent (especially France and Germany) in the various challenges known generally under the heading of the 'linguistic turn'.

Essentially, the basic premise of this 'turn' is that language does not reflect an independent reality or world, but instead *constitutes* that reality or world. Although this notion is habitually associated with Continental structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics,²¹ it is important that it is also implicit in Wittgenstein's notion of the language game, as his analogy of our language with a city – something that we live *in* – suggests.²² This intellectual debt means that the methodology of languages and discourse can itself be seen as part of the 'linguistic turn'.²³ The divergence occurs insofar as that methodology still wishes to see language as (at least to some extent) a *resource* of the speaker, something that is at his or her disposal. More 'thoroughgoing' (if that is the word) formulations of the constitutive power of language would argue that language cannot be seen as a tool of ours in any sense, something that we stand behind and that we can use to signal aspects of the world or to act in that world. The hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer is habitually invoked in the development of this point. Gadamer suggested (influenced ultimately by Heidegger) that language is not something that we use but rather a form of life or a world horizon. Instead of language being at our disposal, language is rather 'behind' 'us', operating and signifying independently of us, beyond our control and indeed controlling us, so that we ourselves become spoken by language rather than speakers of language.²⁴

Another challenge to the agency of the language 'user' comes from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the history of ideas is not a question of intellectual agents responding to particular intellectual or social or political events. Rather, to understand the history of ideas what we have to perceive is a series of blocs of discourse, of talking, which have their own rules of formation and which themselves determine what is there to be talked about and who can do the talking: as Foucault reported of himself,

my objective in *The order of things* had been to analyse verbal clusters as discursive layers which fall outside the familiar categories of a book, a work, or an author ... I wanted to determine ... the functional conditions of specific discursive practices.²⁵

In this history the agent-author is decentred. When we analyse a piece of language, we analyse it in its isolation as an utterance, an element of discourse, without reference to authorial intent:

in brief, if there exist *things said* – and those things alone – then we should not seek the immediate reason for them in the things which are said there or in the men who have said them, but in the discursive system and in the possibilities or impossibilities of utterance which it provides.²⁶

The agency of the author is lost in the structure of discourse of which his or her words form a part and in which he or she inevitably works insofar as he or she is able to discourse about something in the first place. Indeed, authorship or authority becomes instead simply a function of discourse itself.

One might be tempted to think that something of this consequence was always in fact suggested even within the methodology of languages by its insistence upon the importance of linguistic context, for if words only make sense given a specific linguistic context, then it looks as if the context, equally with the author, is an agent of meaning. Moreover, it also looks as if words in context can make that sense – can *do* things – *despite* their author: that what a given author actually succeeded in doing with a particular utterance or text might have been significantly different from what he or she intended to do in speaking or writing.²⁷ But if this illocutionary force belongs to the text rather than the author, the role of the latter (even in cases where illocutionary act and illocutionary force *do* coincide) then threatens to become purely paratextual.²⁸ In sum, to the extent to which language games and discursive regimes, the recovery of languages and the archaeology of discourse, share certain common features,²⁹ the same Foucauldian 'murmur of indifference' seems to arise in both: 'What matter who's speaking?'³⁰

Foucauldian archaeology 'kills' the agent-author and therefore that mode of intellectual history which depends on the notion of individual historical agency. But it is not anti-historical, in the sense that it still sees these blocs of discourse or 'regimes of truth' as situated and located in space and time. It is simply that truth itself has a history. However, a second mode of displacement of the subject, associated with the term 'deconstruction', does (at least in its radical variant) threaten to deny any kind of historical determination of meaning. Deconstruction implies in the first place that the author and authorial intention does not determine the meaning of the text. The author is powerless to control the

'free play of the signifier', the surplus of signification produced by signs. Hence, where Austin had recognized occasional situations in which words will miss their mark – the recipient will fail to achieve 'uptake' – Jacques Derrida in response argued that such 'infelicities' are in fact the normal condition of writing.³¹ By its very nature, writing *always* exceeds context, and therefore the attempt to fix meaning with reference to context is doomed to failure.

From another but related angle, the deconstructive movement also focused on the relations between texts themselves. The view of supposedly individual texts by supposedly individual authors is replaced by a picture of each text as invaded by other texts to such an extent that its integrity as an autonomous structure of meaning is severely compromised. This mutual complicity of texts is called 'intertextuality'.³² It is not limited simply to things heretofore identified as 'texts' or 'great texts', but to any writing at all. On the radical forms of deconstruction, there is nothing to say that intertextuality must be limited to any particular historical moment, thus threatening any kind of intellectual history which depends on the notion of *series*. Exposure of this mutual invasiveness of texts has another dimension, however. Part of the conditions for intertextuality, part of the displacement of the author as the agent of meaning, is a focus on the role of the *reader* in determining the meaning of texts. Reading is not seen as a passive absorption or consumption of meaning but a creative act of making or producing meaning.³³ It is, in effect, another act of *writing*: as we read, we write. Again, on radical forms of deconstruction, this creative writing is not limited to an historical moment, for 'we' are doing it in the here and now.

Intellectual history as practised in the Anglophone world can and has responded to these various challenges of the 'linguistic turn' in different ways.³⁴ First, despite appropriating some of the terminology of 'discourse' and 'archaeology', practitioners of intellectual history have remained resistant to the full-blown Foucauldian idea of the 'episteme', which has been seen as overly monolithic and unable to explain discursive change – that is, the very subject of intellectual *history* – except in terms of 'rupture' or discontinuity.³⁵ Rather, the discursive past is seen to involve at any particular historical moment the simultaneous existence of plural languages or rhetorics 'in confrontation, contestation and interaction with one another'.³⁶ These languages can be tied to specific groups with specific social and professional identities, and these groups may therefore have an investment or interest in perpetuating them, defending them or trying to make them dominant. But such groups were very rarely so insulated that they never came into contact with each others' languages:

they could, and did, read and dispute each others' books, for a start. Geographical, social and professional mobility all play their part in this intellectual promiscuity. But beyond the intellectual promiscuity of writers is the promiscuity of verbiage itself. Words do not limit themselves to particular language games: they travel, carrying their semantic baggage with them, undermining the closure of language games and thus of linguistic context.

If this lack of closure is admitted, it follows, first, that we can recognize a certain latitude for the play of the signifier, and exploit, in parallel, certain deconstructive techniques of reading, without abandoning the idea of historical limits on the possibilities of meaning. These limits will be set by an awareness of the conventions of historical languages together with the associated idea of intentionality – be it the intention which we might plausibly attribute to the author, or the intention of the work itself.³⁷ In practice, the historian will move back and forth between the signification of the words, the place of the text in a conventional milieu, and the possible intentions of the author in writing that text, in an act of interpretation or *making sense* which is necessarily expansive and creative (or 'poetic') but not therefore without historical anchor.³⁸ It also follows, second, that the use of the definite article, as in 'the' context, is oversimplistic and overdeterministic: there may be plural contexts for any one text, and these contexts may themselves overlap or be related in certain ways. Moreover, a context is by definition something that is shared with other speakers – who on this occasion happen to be the hearers or readers. The speaker or text producer may try in various ways to control the context of his or her utterance or to monopolize the definition of what is 'out of context'; but there is no sure way in which only certain readers (and readings) can be included and certain readers (and readings) not – even if text producers not infrequently may resort to the sword to back certain readings and eliminate others. The publicity of language defies its complete appropriation to the purposes of any individual agent.

Intellectual historians can therefore take on board and, indeed, positively welcome the notion of intertextuality within a broad understanding of intellectual history as the history of language or discourse. Equally, many have welcomed the elision of a sharp distinction between production and consumption of meaning, studying the diffusion of meaning through the various interpretative strategies whereby different readers, adept in different vocabularies, construe text and appropriate meaning. Indeed, it is by stressing in this way the plurality, instability and promiscuity of text, both as written and as read, that intellectual

historians may aim to save for the individual author, working within this complex linguistic web, some 'room to manoeuvre', so to speak: some discursive space in which to intervene and possibly to change the course of the conversation; and thus to resurrect the teleology of individual historical agents who are not limited to the discursive realm and are able to *do* things with words, rather than be a mere function of them.³⁹

The aim is there: but it is also, I believe, a continuing challenge, as my 'so to speak' bears witness. The problem is exactly *how* we might refer to an author doing something within discourse without, on the one hand, effectively submerging the author in the discourse and, on the other, removing the author to an entirely different, extradiscursive reality – from which any link to the text becomes a matter of psychological speculation or socioeconomic determinism or worse (!). To the extent that this issue remains unresolved, there is (in my view) still more to be done in understanding the dynamics of contextual interpretation and explanation, and therefore in relating intellectual history to the dimensions of human reality postulated in social, economic and political history.

One way of avoiding these residual but fundamental problems of the relation between discursive and non-discursive realms – between text and context, between words and actions – has been to extend the domain of textuality beyond what have traditionally been regarded as 'texts' to cover all forms of cultural activity. I therefore want to turn now to consider my second trajectory of the involvement of thought in action and production, that aspect of intellectual history which concerns itself with representations and practices.

Thinking about the ways in which people have thought has not been limited to thinking about the languages which carry their constructions of the real. Another way of handling the question, strongly indebted to the mid-twentieth-century French School of social history, concerns itself in various ways with what we might loosely term the 'mental world' of human beings, individually and collectively. The basic idea is very familiar: that the world (both social and natural) which people inhabit is not *the* world, whatever that might be, but the world as it presents itself to them through the mediation of a particular structure of cognition. An all-encompassing description such as this is necessarily very vague: I mean it to cover what Lucien Febvre originally termed the *outillage mental*, or mental toolkit for constructing the world, and more broadly the concept of *mentalité* which went on to be central to sociocultural analysis among historians of the *Annales* School and those influenced by them.⁴⁰ Both *outillage mental* and *mentalité* were taken to

cover not only linguistic equipment or even intellectual or conceptual framework, but also states of perception and affectivity or feeling;⁴¹ indeed, the 'social history of ideas', insofar as it concentrated on the collective mentality as a cultural baseline, was decidedly not focused on the 'high' texts of an intellectual elite but rather on the structure of popular beliefs.

As Roger Chartier argues, despite the subtlety of Febvre's original formulation, the 'history of mentalities' – relying as it did on the quantitative techniques of analysis which characterised the *Annales* School of social history – tended towards a reductive interpretation of texts together with an overly monolithic understanding of the conceptual/perceptual framework of any particular society or social group.⁴² More recent historians of the *Annales* School, Jacques Le Goff and Chartier himself, have preferred to speak of *l'imaginaire social*, the 'social imaginary', or of collective representations. In Chartier's handling, representation is a more flexible and subtle concept involving a triple aspect: the intellectual configurations by which reality is constructed by different groups, the practices that symbolically present or exhibit status or rank or a particular way of being in the world, and the institutionalized forms in which social groupings are perpetuated in visible form.⁴³ Such a conception allows room not only for a monolithic 'mental world' but also for the dynamic and contested process whereby different social groups produce and consume, publish and appropriate representations or images of themselves and others, defining in the process their own identity and that of others.

The term 'representations' brings us finally to consider the type of literary and cultural analysis that goes under the name of 'new historicism' or the poetics of culture. The work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz was and continues to be enormously influential in suggesting that we should read cultural practices like texts in the sense of 'a collectively maintained symbolic structure' having a certain meaning within a shared public system of signification. Geertz's argument, that 'the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles'⁴⁴ opened the door to a whole new type of intellectual history, bringing objects and practices hitherto overlooked or apportioned to another type of history into the domain of textuality. Geertz's most famous example was the Balinese cockfight, but public spectacles, rituals, and games of all sorts, as well as less overtly theatrical activities such as sheep raids, present themselves on this analysis for 'reading'. New historicism, following on Geertz's work (among other sources of inspiration⁴⁵), could thereby open up the 'artful' or 'representational' character not just of works of 'art'

(taken as literature, painting and so on) but of more everyday acts and practices.⁴⁶ It could therefore construct an intertextual reading of the relation between texts and what had hitherto been thought of as 'contextual'.⁴⁷ A good example might be Jonathan Sawday's reading of the Renaissance practice of anatomy in relation to (among other texts) the courtly *blason* in his study *The Body Emblazoned*.⁴⁸ This reading of texts in the light of culture, exploring the intertextuality of representations, has proved a fruitful field of enquiry, bringing intellectual history in its new, post-theoretical form together with certain types of cultural history, literary history, art history and in general all histories which understand themselves as histories of representations. This is so much so that it is often hard to say where intellectual history ends and these other types of cultural study begin.

Nevertheless, for all the stimulation of this way of thinking, historians have expressed some reservations about the extension of textuality. For it creates an effect similar to the 'linguistic turn' in the theory of language, that is, the occlusion of the possibility of access to an extratextual domain. Both world and subject are constructed in terms of cultural symbols (textualized) and all history thus becomes an intertextual reading.⁴⁹ Geertz himself alerted to the dangers of 'turning cultural analysis into a kind of sociological aestheticism',⁵⁰ and Gallagher and Greenblatt insist in their turn that, although 'representations ... cease to have a settled relationship of symbolic distance from matter and particularly from human bodies', the functions, passions, illness, life and death of bodies 'cannot simply be reduced to those representations'.⁵¹ But as Gabrielle Spiegel comments, 'it is difficult to discover in what the materiality of the material domain consists'.⁵² The threatened result is not merely the loss of any explanatory or causal hierarchy, but 'the sense of social agency, of men and women struggling with the contingencies and complexities of their lives in terms of the fates that history deals out to them and transforming the worlds they inherit and pass on to future generations'.⁵³ Perhaps, therefore, we have simply arrived again, by a different route, at that central burden that history cannot evade: the story of bodily human beings, the story of the real.

II

I have given a very schematic outline by way of response to the first of my initial questions, 'What is intellectual history now?' In broad terms, we have seen that intellectual history as it stands encompasses both the history of discourses and the history of representations, with no necessary

barrier – indeed, rather the possibility of fruitful interchange – between them. But in the light of this long detour, I want finally to turn to the second of my initial questions, 'What is *intellectual* history now?' What is it that is distinctive to intellectual history, that stops it from being simply a form of cultural history? We have seen that modern intellectual history cannot be divorced – and nor does it want to be – from cultural history and indeed from social and political history, for in all its forms it accepts the mutual involvement of the conceptual and the material dimensions of human being. But it is possible to argue nevertheless that intellectual history retains its own distinctive focus. For what intellectual historians are interested in is not simply the ways in which people spoke, or their visual imaginary, and how these related to their social, cultural and political context or to other dimensions of their self-representation. It is also – and primarily, I would say – interested in those ways of speaking as ways in which people in the past *made sense* of their world: and therefore it must concern itself with the internal coherence and logic of the structures of mental reference or the languages which it studies. It is here, I think, that texts, and most especially the 'great texts', as the most complex explorations of the limits of language or conceptual frame at a given time, will always have a certain pride of place in what Dominick LaCapra has described as a dialogical enquiry between past and present.⁵⁴ This is the properly *philosophical* dimension of the practice of intellectual history, the boundary line which it shares with philosophy rather than any other kind of history.

This boundary line with philosophy is blurred just like the others. However, this fluidity is not necessarily in the direction of philosophy as traditionally understood. The very notion of 'intellectual history' betrays the figure of *sophia* and the erotics of knowledge as the thirst after the eternally true, the eternally desirable. The intellectual realm is a human, historical creation: understanding it is understanding the materials out of which it is made, the languages and the imagination we have inherited. In this sense, to do intellectual history just *is* to do philosophy. If philosophy has a further task, it is not to gain a better insight into reality, but, analogously to poetry, to stretch our imagination and our language and thus to help create a new world for living in.⁵⁵ We might add that doing intellectual history can itself be understood as poetic in that sense, for intellectual history does not merely unravel the structure of what we have inherited but can also unearth what we have lost: ways of speaking and ways of seeing the world, once current, now exotic and (perhaps) full of possibility.

I do not, therefore, wish to close by appearing to substitute for Carr's deliberately optimistic vision of the widening horizon of rational consciousness a picture of intellectual historians ruefully picking over the remains of verbiage in a disconsolate attempt to make sense of it all.⁵⁶ Rather it is that in trying to unravel the mental worlds of the past, we give ourselves the opportunity to re-weave our own.

Notes and references

1. W.J. Bouwsma, *The Wanring of the Renaissance 1550–1640* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. ix.
2. By Roger Chartier, in a wonderfully lucid and thoughtful overview of the problems involved. See R. Chartier, 'Intellectual History or Sociological History? The French Trajectories', in D. LaCapra and S.L. Kaplan (eds), *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).
3. Cf. N.J. Christie, 'From Intellectual to Cultural History: The Comparative Catalyst', in D.R. Woolf (ed.), *Intellectual History: New Perspectives* (Lewiston; Queenston; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1989), p. 82.
4. A point very familiar by now, thanks to the seminal work of Quentin Skinner. For its original incisive and sparkling formulation see Q.R.D. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, vol. 8 (1969), pp. 393–408, reprinted in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); see also J.A.W. Gunn, 'After Sabine, After Lovejoy: The Languages of Political Thought', in Woolf, *Intellectual History*.
5. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (2nd edn) (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 134–5.
6. For a good treatment of Collingwood within this tradition see D. Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), pp. 39–71.
7. Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 21–7.
8. See, especially, Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', and Q.R.D. Skinner, 'Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts', *New Literary History*, vol. 3 (1972), pp. 393–408, reprinted in Tully, *Meaning and Context*.
9. J.I. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (2nd edn) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
10. J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
11. In developing this focus on authorial intention as the condition of an illocutionary act, Skinner deliberately departed from Austin, who had insisted on the successful 'uptake' of the act on the part of the recipient as a condition for the completion of an illocutionary act. For Skinner, a speaker or text producer can perform an illocutionary act whether or not that act was received as the speaker had intended. See Q.R.D. Skinner, 'A Reply to My Critics', in Tully, *Meaning and Context*, pp. 261–4.
12. I stress 'from the perspective of the author', as it is necessary to differentiate it from the 'point' that a text may have of itself: cf. Tully, *Meaning and Context*, p. 10. Skinner, 'A Reply', distinguishes between the illocutionary act, which

must be an intentional act on the part of the author – the author's 'point' in writing – and the illocutionary force of a particular text – let us say its 'pointedness'. Skinner acknowledges here that illocutionary act and illocutionary force may not coincide; this will be important later on. See below, p. 121.

13. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd edn) (English text only) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968): the term is introduced at p. 5. See also the analogy, so suggestive for intellectual history, of our language as an ancient city, with additions from many periods (p. 8).
14. For a discussion of this issue see J.G.A. Pocock, 'Concepts and Discourses: A Difference in Culture? Comments on a Paper by Melvin Richter', in H. Lehmann and M. Richter (eds), *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies in Begriffsgeschichte* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1996), pp. 47–58, and M. Richter, 'Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*', *History and Theory*, vol. 29 (1990), pp. 38–70.
15. For a clear statement of this sort of method see J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d'Historien*: Some Considerations on Practice', in A.R.D. Pagden (ed.), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
16. Pocock, in 'The Concept of a Language', lists: the language of medieval scholastic, of Renaissance emblematic, of biblical exegesis, of common law, of civil law, of classical republicanism, of commonwealth radicalism (acknowledging that the list is necessarily biased by his own studies).
17. See, for example, Skinner's study of the Lorenzetti frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena: Q.R.D. Skinner, 'Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Artist as Political Philosopher', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 72 (1986), pp. 1–86.
18. For these points see L. Giard, 'Du Latin médiéval au pluriel des langues: Le tournant de la Renaissance', *Histoire, épistémologie, langage*, vol. 6 (1984), pp. 35–55, especially pp. 40–1.
19. M. Biagioli, 'The Anthropology of Incommensurability', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, vol. 21 (1990), pp. 183–209, especially p. 203.
20. For an analysis of the relation of ideology to political action see Skinner, 'Motives, Intentions'; J. Tully, 'The Pen is a Mighty Sword: Quentin Skinner's Analysis of Politics', in Tully, *Meaning and Context*, pp. 10–16, 22–5.
21. E.g. in Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* (1990), reprinted in K. Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 180–283.
22. Cf. note 13 above; see also M. Jay, 'Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas–Gadamer Debate', in LaCapra and Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History*, pp. 86–110, at pp. 87–8.
23. Skinner, 'A Reply', p. 276, points out that his own argument 'leaves the traditional figure of the author in extremely poor health'.
24. For a discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutics and its debt to Heidegger see Jay, 'Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn?'.
25. M. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in D.F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38, at p. 113.
26. M. Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 70: 'bref, que s'il y a des choses dites – et celles-là seulement –, il ne faut pas en demander

- la raison immédiate aux choses qui s'y trouvent dites ou aux hommes qui les ont dites, mais au système de la discursivité, aux possibilités et aux impossibilités énonciatives qu'il ménage'.
27. Cf. p. 116 above, and note 12 above.
 28. I mean 'paratext' in Gerard Genette's later sense of all the material which surrounds the text and affects how it is read (preface, titles, epigraphs, illustrations, notes, and so on). See G. Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (trans. J.E. Lewin) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
 29. Cf. Pocock, 'The Concept of a Language', p. 25, who speaks of the 'historian-archaeologist'.
 30. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', p. 138.
 31. See Derrida's response to Austin: J. Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in his *Margins of Philosophy* (trans. A. Bass) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. 307–30.
 32. For an introduction to the various definitions of intertextuality and the issues involved see M. Worton and J. Still (eds), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).
 33. In another context Michel de Certeau has analysed how consumption itself can be a form of production through strategies of appropriation and assimilation. See M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. S. Rendall) (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xi–xxiv.
 34. For a thoughtful discussion of the possibilities for intellectual history 'after the linguistic turn' see J.E. Toews, 'Intellectual History After the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience', *American Historical Review*, vol. 92 (1987), pp. 879–907.
 35. I. Maclean, in 'Foucault's Renaissance Episteme Reassessed: An Aristotelian Counterblast', *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1998), pp. 149–66, discusses how Foucault's idea of the Renaissance episteme is both misguidedly formulated and also, more profoundly, fails to take account of the resources available within Renaissance discourse for a reflexive awareness of their own modes of cognition.
 36. Pocock, 'Concepts and Discourses', p. 47.
 37. Umberto Eco has developed the idea of an intention of the work, *intentio operis*, in his second Tanner lecture of 1990. See U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); especially p. 64: 'To recognise the *intentio operis* is to recognise a semiotic strategy. Sometimes the semiotic strategy is detectable on the grounds of established stylistic conventions ... How to prove a conjecture about the *intentio operis*? The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole.' Eco goes on to discuss the relations between this *intentio operis* and the intentio of both *lector* and *auctor*.
 38. It seems to me that this is preferable to making a radical separation between 'meaning' in the sense of what the author meant, and 'meaning' in the sense of the signification of the text, leaving the first – the recovery of intention – to the historian and the second to the literary critic or the philosopher, as argued, for example, in M.P. Thompson, 'Reception Theory and the Interpretation of Historical Meaning', *History and Theory*, vol. 32 (1993), pp. 228–72. For one thing, the intentionality or 'pointedness' of the text itself

- (see note 12 above) lies in between these two poles, mediating between them. For another, it then becomes quite unclear why someone interested in what the text means should have any concern for what the author may have meant. I suggest rather that the task of the intellectual historian is both historical and critical-philosophical (see further below, p. 127).
39. For this humanist commitment, see A.R.D. Pagden, 'Introduction', in his *The Languages of Political Theory*, p. 2.
 40. See Chartier, 'Intellectual History or Sociocultural History?', pp. 18–32; R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (trans. L.G. Cochrane) (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell, 1988), pp. 20–48; P. Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), pp. 162–82.
 41. As defined by Febvre, *outillage mental* includes the state of the language, its lexicon, its syntax, the scientific language and instruments, and also the 'sensitive supports of thought' represented by the system of perception (Chartier, 'Intellectual History or Sociocultural History?', p. 19); as defined by Mandrou, *mentalité* includes 'what is conceived and felt, the field of intelligence and of emotion (*affectivité*)' (ibid., p. 23).
 42. Ibid., pp. 29–32.
 43. Chartier, *Cultural History*, pp. 9–10.
 44. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 452.
 45. For a helpful diagnosis of their own enterprise, and its origins and effects, by two of the leading 'new historicist' scholars, see C. Gallagher and S. Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 1–19.
 46. Cf. S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 4–5.
 47. For a critical discussion of this intellectual move see Spiegel, 'History, Historicism', pp. 185–92.
 48. J. Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 196–212.
 49. The conference laughed at the idea of 'pan-representationalism' – that the only true (and possible) object of historical study is representation – but one can see how the idea can take hold.
 50. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 30.
 51. Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 15.
 52. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism', p. 192.
 53. Ibid., p. 195.
 54. For this dialogic aspect of intellectual history, and the continuing importance of the 'great texts' therein, see D. LaCapra, 'Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts', in LaCapra and Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History*, especially pp. 83–5.
 55. See R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), for the development of these views of what follows from accepting the radical 'contingency of language'.
 56. I refer, of course, to Umberto Eco's marvellous allegory of language in the closing pages of *The Name of the Rose* (London: Picador, 1984; trans. W. Weaver), p. 500.