Intellectual History: The Poverty of Methodology II

Intellectual history or ~~the history of ideas~~ begins I take it, in the moment of a loss of innocence, in the introduction of a sense of distance and complication in the approach to past texts and utterances. Exegesis of texts is of course among the oldest kinds of intellectual inquiry; it ~~is~~ was coextensive with the notion of scholarship or learning as such, in theology and law as well as in literature and philosophy. Such exegesis actually thrived on the belief that the meaning of the valued text might be in some ways occult or encoded, but what had to be added, presumably, to exegesis before we can speak of intellectual history in even the least self-conscious sense was the perception that past texts and utterances could be opaque or misleading not because they were deliberately esoteric or encoded but simply because they were past texts, because of their historicity. J.G.A. Pocock in his book The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law ~~has given~~ gave us in the 1950's an ~~brilliant~~ elegant demonstration of one kind of discovery of historicity, ~~in the field of law,~~ in the treatment of Roman law texts and maxims by the jurists of sixteenth and seventeenth century France. Their loss of innocence in relation to Roman law, became as an outgrowth of the Renaissance desire not merely to use, but to recapture the whole meaning of, the prized utterances of classical antiquity. Detailed exegesis of Roman law texts revealed, that they referred to a society significantly different from that of the present. Historical perspective, in this particular field, was discovered unwittingly and even unwillingly, as a result of an initial, naively utilitarian concern to learn from the wisdom of the ancients. In discovering

that, unfortunately, the Roman lawyers were not merely lawyers but Romans, the feudal lawyers of early modern Europe discovered that they themselves were feudal; an historical gap had opened between the venerated text and the modern society which wished to avail itself of the text's wisdom. As ~~'feudal society'~~ became itself an historical category, the dominant way of interpreting that gap, of course, in the eighteenth century, the idea of progress. The distinctiveness of past intellectual moments was to some extent recognized, but as the rungs of a ladder leading to the present. ~~Yet~~ as a recognition of historicity, as the German Romantics, in particular, were to point out, this remained inadequate, through an implicit refusal to recognize that the cultural intentions - what ~~the~~ art historians came to call the characteristic 'Kunstwollen' - of the past might have been radically different from those of the present, and that past cultural endeavours might need to be appreciated in their unique inwardness, and not merely as respectively more or less successful attempts to become polished and enlightened, or gross failures to recognize the true task of mankind. Zeitgeist became an organizing metaphor for history, and historical understanding a distinctive aim of education and self-cultivation and of disciplined inquiry.

I have allowed myself this piece of rather elementary and certainly rather schematic intellectual history because although such a story can properly be told about ways of apprehending the past in the past, the approaches to past texts I have begun to distinguish

in telling the story are not merely sequential. They coexist in the present, to constitute the allies and sometimes the usurpers of what I would want to call intellectual history proper: a direct or innocent appropriation of the thoughts of the past in great texts which speak to us across the centuries; in the valuing of them for their 'contribution' ~~— a favourite word in this context —~~ to our own stock of valued lore, such that their accumulation can be presented as a kind of pseudo-historical story of progress: or again, by the appropriation of past texts and authors into a preferred '~~great~~ tradition', to which we attach ourselves, often with much conscious, fastidious selectivity, by elective affinity, and make our own, as part of the process of making ourselves what we are. These activities are intellectual history's cousins, close or distant; disreputable masquerades in history's clothing or simply respectably distinct, with their own legitimate concerns, depending on the clarity and self-consciousness of their exponents. Such exercises can be stimulating or bland, provocative or complacent, pious or arrogant, sensitive or crude. But even at their best there are important reasons for not calling them intellectual history. At their best, by devoted and scholarly attention to past texts, they contribute to it. At their worst they fake genealogies or offer headmasters' reports on the sterling contribution of one past author, or the regrettable failure of another to keep his eye on the ball, and sometimes they call these history. They do not qualify as ~~intellectual~~ history because of a refusal, deliberate or naively

unselfconscious, to give their primary attention to the historicity of past texts, to their meaning for those who wrote them or those for whom they were most immediately written. There is no reason why all our uses of past texts should do this, but in so far as they do not there are good reasons for not calling the results history, just as there are good educational reasons for not making analogues of intellectual history into excuses for scoring cheap victories over the dead. The latter, like the more sympathetic but still condescending talk of 'contributions', or, more oddly, of 'failures to' contribute, are particularly prominent in purported intellectual histories written from the standpoint of some present intellectual discipline, in which a selection of approved but necessarily only partially successful ancestors is offered as the 'history' of the discipline. The implicit assumption that past concerns and endeavours are to be seen as embryonic, as early 'stages' whose point is derived only from a later fulfilment, makes these examples of 'Whig' history in Butterfield's sense, while the tacit implication that the boundaries between modern disciplines, and their currently fashionable concerns, provide the proper basis for arranging our knowledge of the past, makes them necessarily in varying degrees anachronistic.

The obvious counter to this, and particularly to the kind of anachronistic 'discipline history' I have been castigating, might seem twofold. First, to affirm that the intellectual historian, as he has a special task has also a special subject matter, and

second, as a corollary, that one needs a distinctive methodology or theoretical language through which to identify and explain the special entities, necessarily opaque to a vision schooled only in modern, anachronistic concerns, that he alone distinctively perceives. The concept of 'Zeitgeist' was, I suppose, the most primitive of these postulated entities, but it has had many successors, each with its characteristic implications and commitments: ideologies, world-views, unit ideas, mentalités, cultural hegemony, fields of discourse, sign-systems, epistemes and so on. These, needless to say, when applied to the past, transcend the boundaries between our own intellectual disciplines, or those current in the past; in doing so they seem to establish the distinctive subject matter of the intellectual historian or historian of ideas, and imply the necessity of a more or less elaborate and distinctive conceptual scheme in which the intellectual historian can find the tools of his trade and the confirmation of his, or her, sense of a métier. We can see very clearly, for example, in an early proponent of 'The History of Ideas', A.O. Lovejoy, in the 1930s, the connection between a laudable sense of the importance, for understanding the past, of transcending anachronistically imposed, irrelevant and arbitrarily confining conceptual boundaries between disciplines, and the belief there must be entities, in Lovejoy's case called 'unit ideas', which the historian of ideas distinctively studies.

Despite the many differences, each worth attending to, of these various conceptual entities which have been invoked to define the subject matter of the intellectual historian, they all have in common

the fact that, unlike talk of, say, 'doctrines' which may or may not have been conceived as such by their professors, they postulate entities, as keys to our fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the intellectual life of the past, which were not apprehended as such in that past; indeed, they can be used to suggest that the intellectual historian is habitually engaged in an exercise in demystification, uncovering what was really going on, and the intellectual constraints and imperatives of which those subjected to them were necessarily unaware. In this respect they may seem similar to the naive exponent of intellectual history in the mode of 'progress', but with the significant difference that the complacency of the latter is patent and his anachronisms unselfconscious, those of the former involve a sophisticated recognition of historicity and are explicitly invoked in the cause of historical understanding.

Though I do not want to go so far as to deny our right to any conceptual coinage we choose in our attempts to understand the past, or to insist that we should be restricted to concepts current in the past we study, which would be absurd (though, equally clearly, we must never be led inadvertently to speak as though we postulated a knowledge of our concepts in the intended meanings of past utterances [see Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', passim]), there is nevertheless a good deal in the stance towards the past I have just outlined, which makes me uneasy, in ways I want later to try to indicate.

Perhaps we may begin by reconsidering what, at the beginning of this paper, I have referred to for the most part unsympathetically, as a

form of naiveté, the assumption of the immediate accessibility of past texts, and asking whether there may not also be losses as well as gains, even from the point of view of historical inquiry, in the more characteristically modern attempts to uncover and specify their historicity, even, by a reductio ad absurdum, to the point of dissolving any notion of texts or authors into the medium of the intellectual discourse in which they were suspended. Could the recognition of historicity and the intellectual strategies taken to be implied by it, in fact, become a barrier to understanding the past? In speaking of naive ways of appropriating the past and in confronting them with the loss of innocence which comes with a fuller recognition of its historicity, I have been making, so far, a deliberately tendentious contrast between innocence and sophistication, unconscious anachronism and historical awareness, as a way of sketching a kind of prospectus for intellectual history. The proper attitude to a prospectus being suspicion, let us see how the contrast looks if we approach it with our sympathies reversed, calling the two views of past utterances respectively the transparent and the opaque. On the first view, the utterances of the past are at least no more opaque to us, in principle, than contemporary ones. They are accessible to us either as the expression of thoughts with a continuing life and claim on us (the canonical view) or as moments on the way to ourselves (most usually the progressive view) or some subtler combination of these in the notion of a process of selective transmission,

containing possibilities of recall and renewal (the concept of tradition). Whatever the difficulties of interpreting texts, they are aggravated only marginally by the fact that they are past texts. Whatever perennial philosophical difficulties their interpretation may raise - difficulties in the theory of meaning, difficulties in the postulation of other minds - they are ~~arguably~~ difficulties in no way peculiar to the interpretation of past utterances in particular. In so far as we can raise philosophical doubts, press various kinds of philosophical scepticism, we have to do so in relation to all attempts at communication, not only to those which happen, for us, to lie in the past. In so far as past utterances may initially be hard to understand it is because their referents are unfamiliar: we need a modicum of knowledge to understand ~~the political significance of the Cocoa Tree Club in eighteenth-century London~~, or what was meant in France by a Jansenist or in Victorian England by a Puseyite. We need, that is, factual editorial annotation, identification.

At the opposite extreme from ~~this~~ - and of course I am talking of ideal types, though not ones without literal exemplars - lies the view epigrammatically expressed as 'the past is another country'. The practitioner of intellectual history approaches the past imbued with a sense of its alienness, of the initial inaccessibility of its meanings, like an early anthropological fieldworker arriving for the first time on the shores of the Andaman or Trobriand Islands. His sense of its alienness will probably be marked by the employment

of a certain amount of neologism, of specially coined or at least borrowed methodological jargon. The early fieldworkers in anthropology were powerfully and understandably prepossessed by the importance of a prior methodological commitment and strategy in order to make sense of what they found, of a model which could stipulate how to categorise and how to relate one item to another. Methodology is one's intellectual survival kit, the only reassurance in the face of the wholly unfamiliar and incomprehensible, a remedy for culture-shock, giving one a role and a task; Conrad's Kurtz might have been saved by Malinowski's science of culture. There is then an intrinsic connection between methodological self-consciousness and the sense of unfamiliarity, which may, of course, be deliberately cultivated: anthropologists can study their own villages. But methodology is rarely a life-support capsule for aliens. At this point, it seems to me, the upholder of the transparent view might begin to point out that the insulating implications of the last metaphor are, from the historian's own point of view, rather disturbing: that the methodological self-consciousness which offers to make the unfamiliar intelligible does so on terms which actually place a screen of current methodological concerns between us and the past. In discussion of the past strongly conditioned by a systematically employed methodological jargon and strategy, one is in fact securely cocooned inside the intellectual preoccupations of one's own time, while the concepts ostensibly designed to penetrate the alien intellectual world of the past act instead as an insulation from it.

The defender of the opaque view of the past will presumably want to reply that we cannot help doing this anyway: that some fifth, or fifteenth or eighteenth-century utterance rendered into the 'ordinary language' or 'commonsense vocabulary' of the late twentieth century is in no way less 'interpreted' than is the translation of it into the more consciously artificial and systematic terms erected by a deliberately chosen model or methodology. Our choice is not between interpretation and direct acquaintance - the latter must always be an illusion - but only between different ways of interpreting, and we had, as always, better be aware of what we are doing than not.

This last point seems to me, as far as it goes, just, though obviously there would be much more to be said about the notions of 'acquaintance' or 'understanding' being invoked here. But even if we acknowledge that all complex meanings rendered into another vocabulary and intellectual content are in some sense interpreted, we may still, ~~of course,~~ for example, ask how far this statement acquires a peculiar force when applied to past utterances, or how far, if at all, that force may be a matter of degree and hence a matter for empirical assessment rather than a priori certainty. Is it true that all of the past is equally 'another country' - ~~Macaulay~~ Edward Gibbon as remote and opaque as Gregory of Tours? Do we have to think of past utterances as located entirely within their unique, alien and distinct patterns of meaning, like so many contiguous but absolutely distinct cultural Trobriand or Andaman islands, all

equally strange, so that ~~in approaching them~~ any sense of initial familiarity is merest delusion and we have nothing to rely on but our methodological tool-kit bought ~~at the G.U.M. or the Galeries Lafayette~~? But if, as common sense suggests, at least in approaching ~~European~~ intellectual history, alienness is a matter of degree, then we presumably find this out empirically, piecemeal, as we do much else, by learning to find the familiar in the unfamiliar and, of course, vice versa. For, are not the characteristic discourses of past European societies sometimes more like dialects of a language, of which our own are others, rather than like Chinese or ~~Hungarian~~? And if we do succeed in rendering the past into our own carefully chosen methodological constructs - and no doubt we shall succeed, for what is there to stop us, what resistance can the past offer? - when we have done this, what shall we have accomplished if the language into which we have rendered it remains remote both from the ways people ~~talked~~ to each other in the past and perhaps also the ways we habitually speak to each other now? We shall no doubt have acquired some new certainties about the past, or perhaps learnt new and more imposing ways of expressing our old ones, but in what ways will our thoughts or imaginations have been extended?

These are loose terms I am employing here, and open to misconstruction. I am not saying, to repeat an earlier point, that we do not have the right to coin our own concepts for interpreting the intellectual life of the past, or that such concepts may not have their uses in suggesting new ways of grouping, of making

connections and of understanding the rules and constraints of which people in the past were not fully aware precisely because they observed them without any sense of constraint, as we do not feel constrained by or consciously aware of the grammar of the language we speak. Not least, I do not deny that there can be important gains in sometimes being made to see the familiar as strange. I do not want to deny any of this. What I want to propose is two considerably weaker assertions: first, that there not only is not - which seems at the moment to be simply true - but should not be any single, unified methodology or paradigm or theoretical language which constitutes intellectual history and defines its practitioners, and secondly that there may be losses as well as gains, limitations as well as possible enhancements, in our systematic adoption of any of these.

The belief that the past is another country, or rather a continent of them, to which we have no immediate access and which we need therefore to approach through the self-consciousness of deliberately chosen theoretical concepts is necessarily linked to some kind of methodological holism. It derives initially, as I said at the beginning, from the ~~initial~~ perception (which I think it is, namely a true assertion about the past) that people in the past harboured different cultural intentions from those of the present. This then ~~leads~~ led on to the postulation of ~~an~~ an agent or Geist to do the intending, and also to the postulation of 'periods' as the field in which the particular spirit manifests its activity

and whose coherence, and separation from other periods, is characterised by these varied but ultimately linked manifestations. Although the vocabulary of this, except in casual speech, has been discarded - 'Zeitgeist' is scarcely uttered nowadays without implied inverted commas; was it always so? - the cultural holism to which it gave rise is by no means obsolete, and is, I suspect, for many people, constitutive of what they would mean by intellectual history. We can, of course, enumerate some of the puzzles which arise from this reification of periods, however sophisticated the language in which it is expressed: how do we get from one to another through time (wheel up a materialist dialectic or declare nescience and substitute 'archaeology' for 'history')? How many are there? Do they even necessarily have anything specifically to do with time? To me, to be egoistic for a moment, it seems self-evident that there is a sense in which, despite all differences and the complexities introduced by the passage of two hundred years, Hume and I inhabit the same cultural world and language - as we certainly inhabit closely related dialects of the same actual language - in a way that Foucault and I do not. ~~If I needed reassurance about the possibility of intertranslatability between different sign-systems or cultures I should choose reading Foucault rather than Hume as my test-case.~~ Time may be one critical barrier, but cultural geography is clearly another. My latter example is a particularly gross and intractable case; in other, more complicated cases of cultural overlap, lines of connection may intersect in various ways. We inhabit a culture casually, of course,

we sometimes find it indispensable to speak holistically - rich in historical resonances and reminiscences, and each of us inhabits some bits of the past more familiarly than others as a matter of affinity as well as of knowledge; it is indeed the task of intellectual history to extend as well as deepen that familiarity. For such a situation, the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblances seems to offer a more appropriate model than the hard-edged, holistic essentialism of 'ideologies', 'sign-systems', and the like, ~~though I would not deny that each of these may have its uses, it own kinds of heuristic suggestiveness~~.

The psychological or political reasons for preferring a hard-edged holism we may leave on one side; intellectually it usually originates in and is justified by the confident possession of a metaphysical theory which purports to designate, to put it crudely, what there really and necessarily is, or a theory of meaning which tells us what can ~~properly~~ be spoken of or referred to. As a consequence, very often, we get a theory, as in Marx's materialism, of what kind of thing is, not merely often or habitually, but necessarily and generally, causally efficacious, and what cannot be, as when Marx, rejecting Hegel, says that the subject of history is real, living men, or when Foucault says more or less the opposite. Hence, of course, as one derivative of holism, the conception I referred to earlier of history (or the archaeology of knowledge) as demystification, as the uncovering of what was really there and really efficacious, in ways opaque to those implicated in the mystification, and also to us until we obtain the right metaphysical or semiotic key.

At this point I want to introduce a figure who has hitherto played no part in the discussion, though unless he exists, it seems to me, all such discussion is vain: what I will call the working intellectual historian: the worker bee, artisan, footslogger with sleeves rolled up. A product of the academic division of labour, he is, we will suppose, only marginally interested in questions of ontology or the theory of meaning, but knowledgeable, with the sediment of years of close attention, about chosen aspects of the intellectual past. It is his vote which has to be solicited, but also to be appraised for what it may be worth. His attitude to our two protagonists is at the moment, I take it, a desire to keep his distance. He may or may not respect the enthusiasms of the canonist, the elective affinities cherished by the traditionalist, but in either case they are not his métier; he will probably be disposed to find both rather cavalier in their attitude to historicity. So far he is inclined towards the holist believer in the past as another country. But he is not a holist - holism is unlikely to be learned from practice; it derives from elsewhere, and the tendency of close acquaintance is to make its certainties seem insupportable or at best jejune. Moreover he may well feel uneasy with one aspect of the denial of the possibility of direct acquaintance with the past, unmediated by conscious or unconscious methodological choice. He discovers that he has apparently been practising a methodology, usually called low-level empiricism, replete with questionable (and now unfashionable) epistemological presuppositions, all his

professional life. Told that he must choose, he finds dismaying the variety of metaphysical and epistemological preferences and the supposed methodological keys cut out of them. But the metaphysics, epistemologies and theories of meaning of the nineteen-~~eighties~~ nineties are not, he wants to argue, his professional business. How is he to choose? History itself will give him no answer; history, on a moderately optimistic view, and within the limitations of a particular vocabulary and set of preoccupations, may tell us what was so; it surely cannot, even on the most optimistic view, plausibly tell us what was necessarily so; history remains an obstinately a posteriori form of knowledge even if we necessarily bring a priori notions to it. The second discouragement for our intellectual historian, wooed by rival metaphysical and methodological promises, is not merely their variety, which tends ultimately to resolve itself in different ways around the perennial philosophical polarities of materialism and idealism, between correspondence & coherence theories of reference, but precisely that they do seem to be perennial. If he has learnt anything from intellectual history it is likely to be that such debates are perennial, and that if he waits for the winner he will wait forever. His bleak alternatives seem therefore to be either an all too well justified but self-stultifying methodological caution, or an arbitrary ~~Kierkegaardian~~ leap of methodological faith which, qua historian, he has no professional competence in justifying. Yet if he continues to practise his trade while refusing the leap of philosophical commitment, he lays himself open to the charge that his refusal is not a real one, but only a

refusal to recognize that he has made it, that philosophical presuppositions are embedded in whatever language we speak.

At this point, taking courage, he will presumably begin to query whether the connection between philosophical or ideological presupposition and historical practice need be thought of as so direct and rigid as the methodologists' arguments imply. For it is one thing to argue that the intellectual historian, like any other scholar, should be willing to re-examine his presuppositions, if by that we mean the presuppositions of particular historical arguments. Nor have I - to drop an unconvincing pretence of objectivity and put on my tradesman's apron - denied that more general, philosophically inspired methodological reappraisal can sometimes be illuminating, setting the familiar in a new light and pointing in inadequately explored directions. But to insist that historians should always begin the search for new interpretations of their material by re-examining their epistemological presuppositions ~~they share with other members of their culture~~ would be absurdly to overweight philosophical self-consciousness, as opposed to the encounter with historical sources, as the seed-bed of novelty in understanding the past. While of course, to insist that the intellectual historian should satisfactorily identify and resolve the philosophical questions raised by doing history or interpreting utterances before going on to practise his craft would be necessarily self-stultifying; historians, that is, would be left, given the perennial nature of philosophical questions, hypothetically considering the presuppositions of the kind of historical inquiries they might have conducted had they not considered their presuppositions.

In saying this I do not mean to imply that the historian in practising his craft has access to some philosophically neutral, purely descriptive language, devoid of presuppositions. But I do want to suggest that in a world of contending philosophical positions, of rival and apparently perennial metaphysical and epistemological scepticisms and affirmations, there may be much to be said for Hume's remedy of carelessness and inattention. It is precisely because I am not arguing for a neutral language of inquiry for intellectual history that I am arguing against the notion of a ~~methodological~~ theoretical language at all. Yet in discounting the notion of a neutral methodological language, I admit that the intellectual historian makes choices, even if unaware that he is doing so. The question is, how should he? If we discount the prospect of systematic philosophical guidance, what kinds of consideration may still be relevant if one takes seriously the notion of a choice? In making one, it would at least seem sensible to consult the point or value of what we claim to be doing. It is unlikely - indeed I am sure that it will not be the case - that this will be exactly the same for each of us, even if we accept 'intellectual historian' or 'historian of ideas' as our most convenient designation, so I can at this point only speak confessionally and pedagogically. I do not mean that mine is the only choice, or even that it would be a good thing if it were, but only that, given the designation, it is a respectable one for which defensible reasons can be given. To me the point, so far as it can be expressed

briefly - and that is not very far - is the extension and deepening of that familiarity with the intellectual life of the past I spoke of earlier, and with it the extension of one's sense of cultural possibilities. Part of what I mean here may be expressed by the analogy of listening to a conversation. To practise intellectual history, that is, is to listen to the conversations of the past, to overcome in some limited way the parochialism of the present, and to try to enable one's readers and pupils to listen with an understanding which is not superficial but intimate. We break into the hermeneutic circle, as we learn a natural language, learning to understand the parts by the whole and building an understanding of the whole by the parts. There are two implications worth attending to in the analogy with learning a language. The first is that although we can characterise the method in very general and perhaps unnecessarily pretentious terms as hermeneutic, there are no recipes. We may get guidance, tuition, and above all example, from those who know the language, and we may learn by rote some rules of grammar, but ultimately, to come to inhabit an historical language, or a natural one we must learn, as we say, to play it by ear. Our model here, it is important to insist, is knowing, and also translating from, a natural language, not theoretical linguistics. It is true that we shall not have analysed what we are doing when we translate, unless we have a theory of meaning and language use. But we can in fact translate without the theory and we do not, indeed, go to the theory to teach us how to translate. What I mean, incidentally, by a natural language here - not a term without its complexities - is one in which the business of everyday human practical and emotional relations are transacted, not merely the business of academics or bureaucrats like mathematicians, lawyers, engineers or, nowadays, literary critics.

But the analogy with translation draws our attention to another consideration. You cannot translate from a language without also translating into one. This points, I think, to the limitation in the representation of intellectual history as a recreation or re-experiencing of past thoughts. In writing it or speaking about it we have to ask to and for whom do we translate? The answer, presumably, is oneself and one's readers or pupils: more generally, ourselves. But who are 'ourselves'? Inhabitants of the late twentieth century? The late twentieth century, even in England alone, is a fairly culturally bewildering place (and incidentally a hard case for any holistic theory of culture). It is doubtful whether it would be possible to produce a 'translation' of the past that seemed illuminating - I am tempted to say 'intelligible' - to both a Foucaultian and to me. In choosing the language into which to render the past, one in a sense chooses both one's past and one's present, declaring not only what one finds interesting in the former and how, but whom one wishes to address in the latter. And if anyone wants to add that the choice of one's present is necessarily a political choice, I am prepared to agree with them.

Let me take for the sake of example three possible ways of conceiving of a present to address, a constituency to serve or a language one translates into; one could no doubt devise others.

1. Some broad notion of our present 'educated' speech, and the ways it, and the culture it expresses, most saliently differ from the culture being talked about, from which we derive a sense of what most needs, in the latter, to be explained and interpreted.

Theoretically, all speech is perhaps a dialect. Sociologically, how widely it is spoken is variable. So is the related question how many human utterances it can govern.

I realise that this category is questionable. It is certainly not all-inclusive, and it would probably be too optimistic - and it would certainly arouse opposition - to speak as one might once have done of 'centrality'. 'BBC English' is now widely regarded as a dialect like any other. All the same, certain methodological practices follow I think from the adoption of such a notion, even if it is to some extent an unrealistic one: for example the deliberate avoidance of all neologisms and technicalities not felt to be absolutely essential.

2. Some notion of a professional consensus: what has been 'done', what 'needs' doing, adding to or resisting. There are unattractive features about this; it exalts fashion, thwarts idiosyncrasy, and its vocabulary is often philistinely narrow, predictable and inflexible. But we all inhabit it in some degree, on pain of merely soliloquising or succumbing to megalomania.

3. Some coherent, relatively tightly structured ideological/methodological position (I was inclined to say 'sect'). It is distinguished from (1) by an extreme hospitality to technical vocabulary and from (1) and (2) by a strong desire for theoretical coherence and a close and desired connection with metaphysical positions or theories of meaning. The most influential matrices of such positions, at the moment, are Marxism and Structuralism.

Any of these three may promote an intrusive and insensitive deployment of anachronism in the interpretation of past writings. The first does so, characteristically, when the past is used to

flatter the present or is in some obtrusive way 'used' for specific purposes, rather than being allowed quietly to challenge it. The second, does so chiefly when professionalism stifles imagination. Only the last, it seems to me, does so intrinsically and necessarily, obtruding the intellectual excitements and controversies of the late twentieth century crudely between us and the conversations to which we are attempting to listen. And the point of intellectual history, I wish to say, is to re-establish connection, to mediate. A sceptic will at this point wish to deny that this is ever possible; will want to insist that the influence of our categories over what we can say or understand is such that we have only the choice of which mirror to make faces at ourselves in: history, literature, science and so forth. I have already said that I can see nothing here that applies peculiarly to our claims to knowledge of the past, and we can of course add that if it did we could presumably never know that it did. To put the point merely as an affirmation, I believe that negotiation or mediation is possible in our relation to the past, and that being negotiation it is in a sense two-sided; that we listen as well as speak, and that even in our necessarily selective listening we sometimes hear what we do not expect, and that in recognizing the ability of the past to surprise us, in attending to what does not fit our preconceptions, we can learn. To do this we must, of course, have preconceptions to be upset, but these can be more or less open to or insulated from surprise. And in choosing how and for whom to write and

without seeking the inclusiveness of a lowest common denominator,

translate, it seems to me that some ~~general~~ still usable ~~(though for how long?)~~ notion of the educated lay speech, the ~~'ordinary language'~~ lingua franca of our time and ~~society~~, as far as possible devoid of technicalities and neologisms, though necessarily limited, and loaded with unanalysed presuppositions, is likely to be a more sensitive and flexible receiver, better because richer, more heterogeneous and more variously attentive, than the tight, dictatorial, systematically imposed definitions and categories of a more coherent, highly organized and polemically self-conscious methodological position. In saying this I am, of course, implicitly rejecting holism as a way of interpreting our own culture as I did earlier as a way of viewing the past. I do not believe, that is - and the difficulties I have experienced in writing this paper seem to me a justification of my non-belief - that we inhabit a single hegemonic view, embodied in our language, so that to disentangle ourselves from it requires a leap into an at least partially artificial vocabulary; ~~on the contrary,~~ the hegemonic possibilities of such contrived academic languages seem evident and daunting. Of course there are in common speech weightings, exclusions, patterns of meaning, in the present as in the past, which transcend individual utterances and which give them the possibility of meaning. But they are to some extent countervailing, reflecting past and present conflicts as well as consensus, and in the varied suggestibility and sensitivity, the informal flexibility of the ways we habitually speak to each other lies, it seems to me, our best chance of allowing the conversations of the past sometimes to interrupt ours.

In a sense then, it seems to me, that the old aspiration I began by speaking of, to appropriate and assimilate the intellectual past, was right in its intention, though sometimes no doubt conceived in rather crudely instrumental terms. It was only misguided in so far as it was naively optimistic about how easy this was to do, and in so far as, by suppressing the alienness of the past, it deprived itself of the possibility of learning more than it intended. No doubt, too, it was naive to approach past texts only with veneration, though veneration still seems to me preferable to systematic contempt. But if, in our enthusiasm for demystification we turn back to condescension, like latter-day Voltaires armed with more sophisticated conspiracy-theories - more sophisticated in that they do not impute conscious intention -; if in this way we turn condescension into a system, then it seems to me we lose a large part of the educative possibilities of the loss of innocence I spoke of at the beginning, in the discovery of the challenge of the historicity of past texts. We lose, that is, the challenge of the past to our intellectual parochialism, when it is turned aside by a renewal of self-conscious complacency in our own methodological enlightenment.

In conclusion, and by way of addendum, I want to put in a word for one particular embattled common-sense concept, that of the author. It is understandable I think that the concept of the author, at any rate as an organizing principle, should have become unfashionable. A sense of the insufficiency of the individual author, his text and his <u>oeuvre</u>, as the unit of attention, marks a decisive step towards

a notion of intellectual history. In recent years the reaction against author and isolated text has been pressed hard, both in the Parisian terrorist attempts to eliminate him altogether and in the more moderate Anglo-American contextualism of John Pocock ~~and Quentin Skinner~~. I have myself no wish at all to deny the shaping coerciveness of the discourses we inhabit or the historical and exegetic importance of identifying them. But in the unfashionability of the author and the oeuvre there are, again, it seems to me, losses as well as gains. Intellectual portraiture, that is, still seems a valuable way of entering the past. It is in the ripples and eddies of the language set up by the unique authorial personality that we see a language or form of discourse in its vitality, with its possibilities of novelty, adaptation and inconsistency, and also in its subjection to various kinds of pressure, not just one: not just ~~linguistic~~ constraints or the logical dynamics of arguments, or material motives or socially conditioned psychological imperatives, but all of these, variously combined and with distinctive outcomes. Individual authors, if at all comprehensively attended to, insist on telling one what they found important, and in doing so allow the past to answer back. It is precisely the ~~intellectually arbitrary~~ character of the concept of the oeuvre that makes it valuable. If we rule out as trivial, or as irrelevant idiosyncrasy, whatever does not fit our conceptual scheme, we shall have insulated ~~it~~ from all possibility of challenge except from some rival methodological programme at a similar level of

Newton's work on the book of Daniel, for example,

generality. The varied interests of individuals remind us of the heterogeneity of the pressures under which history is made and words are spoken, discouraging monistic theories of the necessary priority of one mode of human activity over all the others, whether it be language-using, following the logic of the argument, promoting interests, exercising power or satisfying material needs.

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