Psychoanalysis, History and Subjectivity

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Clinical psychoanalysis since Freud has put reconstruction of the patient's history at the forefront of its task, but in recent years this approach has not been so prominent. This book aims to explore and re-evaluate the relationship between history and psychoanalysis.

Roger Kennedy develops new perspectives on historiography by applying psychoanalytic insight to the key issues of narrative, time and subjectivity in the construction of historical accounts. He also throws new light on the importance of history for and within psychoanalytic treatment. It is argued that human subjectivity is a major element in any historical enterprise, both the subjectivity of the historian or clinician and that of those being studied. Illustrated with clinical examples, *Psychoanalysis, History and Subjectivity* covers areas such as postmodernism, the nature of memory, clinical evidence and the place of trauma.

Psychoanalysis, History and Subjectivity will be of great interest both to professionals in the psychoanalytic and therapeutic fields and to historians.

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Chapter 1

Introduction, or swimming in the past

The aim of this book is to explore the nature of history through the eyes of a psychoanalyst, exploring what it means to think historically both within psychoanalysis and beyond. Not only do I think that the study of history can help us to understand clinical situations better, but also that psychoanalytic thinking can help to enlarge our understanding of the nature of history. One of the main themes concerns how our models of the human subject determine how we see the nature of history. In concrete terms, history in the past has often examined people as objects, as victims or as anonymous and lost in the 'larger' picture, instead of seeing them as subjects, with human agency. But to treat people as subjects or agents means some examination of what we mean by subjectivity. Such an examination is at the heart of much of the following text.

Walsh (1967) has described the historian's task to be like the construction of a mosaic; and, indeed, there are many different ways of understanding what we mean by history. My own work can be seen as a meditation on this theme. I should make clear at the outset that my main focus is not to apply psychoanalytic understanding directly to historical figures or situations. That is, my main interest is not in 'psychohistory', as, for example, ably demonstrated by Loewenberg (1985, 1993), who is both an historian and a psychoanalyst.

The word 'history', or 'historia', was coined by Herodotus (1954), meaning enquiry or investigation, the study of what human beings have done, said and thought, and this remains basic to historical understanding; enquiry creates history out of otherwise dead events of the past, and makes the 'now of the past' alive in the present. My eventual aim, after a considerable time spent enquiring about the nature of historical thinking, is to address questions concerned directly with the relationship between history and psychoanalysis, such as how does a psychoanalytic enquiry take hold of the past, and what kind of history is created by such an analytic enquiry?

I suggest that there are at least five ways of seeing the past from the clinical perspective. First of all, patients may cling to the past, find it difficult to let go of previous painful experiences, and remain imprisoned in a dead world of past objects, in perpetual mourning, like Miss Havisham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Second, they may unconsciously live out the past, repeating and re-enacting old traumas.

behaving in fixed and unsatisfactory ways in the present, such as constantly repeating destructive ways of relating to partners or children. Third, the past may be repressed or denied, as if it did not exist, producing massive gaps in the memory, which may then produce current symptoms, such as hysterical amnesia. One can thus see how some people suffer from remembering the past, while others suffer from not remembering it. Next, in contrast, the past can be faced, with all its pain and conflicts, so that traumas can be worked through, and proper mourning can take place. And, last, the past can be 'revisited' from time to time without constant or excessive anxiety, as another country worth visiting. For many patients, such revisiting of their past can only take place once past traumas have been worked through in therapy. I suggest that these different, and probably overlapping, ways of seeing the past from a psychoanalytic perspective have consequences for how the historian examines the ways in which human subjects view their own history over time, with greater or lesser amounts of anxiety, denial or acceptance.

The task of this book is to 'visit' a number of different perspectives on the nature of the past and of our understanding of what we mean by 'history'. It is my ultimate hope that such an undertaking will be clinically useful, if only to demonstrate to clinicians what a complex task it is to think about the role of history in the clinical encounter. In order to accomplish this task, I shall be frequently moving between the study of history and that of psychoanalysis.

I shall make a simple yet vital distinction between the past and history. The past only becomes history by means of a special sort of undertaking, an enquiry involving recording what subjects have remembered and said about those past events. These remembrances are then woven into an elaborate narrative account. Furthermore, the past remains fixed so long as it does not become history, that is rethought and redescribed at some later date. Historical enquiry is a way of freeing up the past from its mere pastness.

Walsh points out that the word 'history' is ambiguous, as it covers the totality of past events and also the narrative or account we construct of them (Walsh 1967: 16). The great western historical thinkers of the past had many different visions of the historical enterprise. There are those like Hegel and Marx who maintain that there is an overall unity in history, whether that be through reason or economic understanding; while others, like Vico and Herzen, see only multiplicity. For Michelet, the task of the historian was to remember (White 1973: 156). The historian, following the path marked out by the emotions of the heart, acted as custodian of the memory of the race, against any tyranny which might have offended that memory by systematic suppression of the truth. The historian, like Prometheus, brings to the dead a fire to melt the ice in which their voices have been frozen, so that the dead will be able to speak once more for themselves. Thus the aim of the historian is to bring frozen voices to life. This gives the task of the historian a certain moral authority: their work is about maintaining the truth against the forces of suppression.

Ranke considered that the aim of the historian was to reveal what actually happened in the past, and that history itself was essentially rule-governed and

orderly. Tocqueville on the other hand emphasized the primordial chaos underlying history. He conceived history as a collision of great forces, conflicts between human nature and society. Croce emphasized how historical thought is 'born in an extremely complicated and delicate dialectical process out of the passion of practical life, transcending the latter and getting free of it in a pure judgment of truth. By virtue of that judgment, passion is converted into decisive action' (Croce 1938: 7).

Turning to some more recent thinkers, Dray (1995: 22) describes history as a type of research or activity, a way of finding out certain things, not just a way of preserving memories or traditions. Following Collingwood (1946), he emphasizes that its subject matter is human activity in the past, the understanding of which requires a rethinking of past thought, or a re-enactment of past experience. Its mode of procedure is the interpretation of what are here and now perceptible as relics of past human activities, the latter being referred to as evidence; such interpretation requires a characteristic mode of questioning and distinctive concepts and arguments, different from a natural science viewpoint. Its ultimate goal is human self-knowledge, or, as I will explore, knowledge of human subjectivity.

Gallie considers that the word history stands for:

> . . . a wide family or syndrome of researches and writings, the being members of which always contain narratives of past human actions. These narratives are followable or intelligible in the same general way as all stories are. Of course, to be historical a narrative must rest on evidence, i.e. it must deal with events that can be shown to have actually happened . . . A historical narrative . . . will usually succeed in making its subject-matter more intelligible to its readers . . . by showing its interconnections . . . with other relevant historical evidence and results.
>
> (Gallie 1964: 70)

Historical thinkers seem to vary in how much they see history in terms of a single or unified narrative or 'story', whether that be a humanistic, scientific or philosophical one, and how much they see it as involving many stories.

Gardiner (1952: 82–3) emphasizes that the historian studies and tells stories about particular events, and in this sense history is mainly concerned with the world of human individuality. At the same time, historians write on different levels and at different kinds of distance from their material; they write with different aims and interests, in different contexts and from different points of view (ibid. p. 109).

Oakeshott (1933: 107) considered that history was a mode of experience in which the focus was on the past for its own sake, the past for the sake of the past. The historian is concerned with a particular past, and with the dissimilarity of the past and the present.

Bloch emphasized how history was concerned with men and time; the object of history is man and men. 'Behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and

behind institutions, which seem almost entirely detached from their founders, there are men, and it is men that history seeks to grasp' (Bloch 1949: 21).

Gadamer defines history as 'the great dark book, the collected work of the human spirit, written in the languages of the past, the text of which we have to try to understand' (Gadamer 1960: 156).

Gay, himself both an historian and a psychoanalyst, describes how the historian resembles the psychoanalyst who must sympathetically penetrate the most secret recesses of the patient's life and yet remain a stranger to his patient forever (Gay 1974: 215).

Foucault, a fundamental thinker for making sense of the postmodern trend in understanding history, emphasizes how history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked (Foucault 1969). He points to a discontinuous model of historical understanding, one which looks for ruptures, breaks, mutations and transformations rather than the continuities looked for in much of traditional history.

Carr (1961) points out that when we ask the question 'What is history?' the answer is consciously or unconsciously a reflection of our known position in time.

Collingwood defined history as complex means of research or enquiry, which has four defining characteristics:

(a) that it is scientific, or begins by asking questions, whereas the writer of legends begins by knowing something and tells what he knows;
(b) that it is humanistic, or asks questions about things done by men at determinate times in the past;
(c) that it is rational, or bases the answers which it gives to its questions on grounds, namely appeal to evidence;
(d) that it is self-revelatory, or exists in order to tell man what man is by telling him what he has done.

(Collingwood 1946: 18)

Collingwood, as mentioned above, also makes the fundamental point that the historian discerns the thoughts of past people by rethinking them in his own mind. The history of thought for him, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's mind (ibid. p. 215). This will become a basis for a theme of my own that the past in the clinical encounter can be seen as that which is re-enactable between analyst and patient.

I have chosen to organize my own story about history in terms of a particular plot, that of differing models of human subjectivity. This may seem an arbitrary form of organization, or, on the other hand, one too much influenced by my psychoanalytical perspective. But, rather like Ricoeur (1983) who chose to organize his view on history around the central issue of time as a fundamental element of historical experience, I consider that human subjectivity is a major element in any historical enterprise, both the subjectivity of the historian and that of those he

is studying, and for that reason it is useful and justifiable to examine how such subjectivities are organized, or disorganized, in any historical undertaking.

I shall develop throughout this study a rough distinction between the 'History of Layers' and the 'History of Events'. The former, which is closely linked to the psychoanalytical perspective, involves looking at history as a succession of shifting layers, as fragments of living reality, where, as in the unconscious of the individual subject, distinctions between the past and present may be blurred. The latter is the more traditional view of history as a comprehensible and ordered sequential narrative of events.

Chapter 2 introduces the argument of the book by examining how the historical past is problematic; its status is far from easy to comprehend, and it is not directly or fully known. Questions like 'Who killed President Kennedy?' remain unanswered enigmas. Any answers that we have about what happened in the past have to be constructed, imagined, recreated, inferred, retraced after the event from fragments; the historical view is only partial. It is about human minds interacting with other minds, and, thus, is full of the passions, ambiguities and paradoxes of human subjectivity.

I also ask whether or not history has a plan of any sort, and how one can make sense of it. Is history, as Tolstoy (1869) maintained, so infinitely complex that the individual subject can only accept their incapacity to influence the flow of events? Or is the human being both subject 'to' history in the way that Tolstoy maintained, yet also capable, at least sometimes, of becoming the subject 'of' their history, at least in their own sphere?

Chapter 3 looks at a specific piece of history – that of the closure threat to the National Health Service Cassel Hospital in 1990 – in order to examine Tolstoy's view of the powerlessness of the individual to influence the course of history, as well as to see how subjects can become caught up in the myths of their own past in an institutional setting. The presentation uses a mixture of the history of layers and the history of events.

Chapters 4 to 8 begin the more formal elaboration of the relationship between subjectivity and history by presenting preliminary considerations from four different angles.

Chapter 4 starts with the Greek vision of history as enquiry into past events, and as placing the endpoint of any enquiry as its yardstick. Any narrative about the past is a structure imposed upon events by the historian. That is, any historical undertaking involves the subject making choices about what is significant in any constructed narrative.

Chapter 5 looks at two poles of the historical view: the Greeks who created the notion of history, and the Jews who first put meaning into history. The lesson from both civilizations is that the writing of history is intimately related to trauma and loss. It is also suggested in this chapter that the Rabbinical playing with time was a powerful way of retaining the historical vision, with its merging of dream and fiction, similar to some postmodern writings.

Chapter 6 looks at how the history of Herodotus has not been superseded. One can say that the history of history is not a series of linear events, but instead a history of many layers of thought, any layer of which can be restored to life, or picked out, at a particular moment in the present. The historical undertaking involves a process of picking out elements from one or more layers, what in the work of Walter Benjamin becomes a process of collecting, a montage of the debris of the past. But this is not a random process; what happens to the layers and how they are combined is of crucial interest, as is who does the choosing of combinations of layers. That is, human subjectivity inevitably comes into the picture in any historical undertaking, however much the subject attempts to hide their subjectivity with the use of an objective mask.

Chapter 7 examines how different ways of creating meaning out of the past reflect different historical visions, and how different ways of seeing history involve varying amounts of fragmentation and cohesion. The history of history is a constant tension between conceiving history on the one hand as part of an overall vision, purpose or description, and on the other hand seeing history as involving multiple frameworks and viewpoints; between singular history or multiple histories.

Chapters 8 to 10 develop the issues raised about subjectivity and history in more detail. Many recent historical thinkers emphasize that there are limits to the documentary aspect of historical activity; that there is little or no sense in attempting to see the past 'as it really happened'. Instead, they see the past as a text, in that documents from the past are themselves texts that process or rework reality (Lacapra 1985: 19). Multiple narratives usually play a fundamental role in this view of history. I shall refer to a number of these thinkers throughout my study. I shall pay particular attention to them in two chapters: Chapter 9, 'The Fragmented Subject', where I look at the key role played by Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, and, above all, Freud, in laying the foundation for this basically 'postmodern' world view; and Chapter 10, 'The Subject of Narrative', which brings together various thoughts about the place of stories in psychoanalysis and history. I would maintain that the postmodernist 'challenge' (Berkhofer 1995) offers many useful ways of questioning what we mean by historical understanding; its emphasis on, for example, multiple meanings and many voices, demystification and deconstruction, resembles the psychoanalyst's open-ended and questioning attitude. However, I should also declare here my own position, which I shall later defend, that documentary evidence is a vital part of historical research, provided its limitations and ambiguities are also recognized.

Partly because there seems to me to be evidence of a return of the domination of positivist thinking in history, psychoanalysis and beyond, in Chapter 8 I explore some of the arguments raised in the debates about the relationship between history and science that took place between the 1940s and the 1960s, mainly amongst British and American scholars. I also refer to historical thinkers of that time who have become perhaps less fashionable, as I think they still have much to contribute.

Much of my book explores the kinds of issues raised by these and other past and present historians and philosophers of history. I use these ideas to explore the

analyst's historical position, how the analyst attempts to interpret the past actions of the patient in a number of different and complex ways, understanding what the patient felt at past times and continues to feel, bridging time, offering a home for the revival of past experiences and putting the past in question, while also helping the patient survive the traumatic effects of the past. While I defer a focused account of clinical issues until I have thoroughly explored the historical dimension, there is reference to clinical work throughout the book. Chapter 11 covers clinical issues concerned with the interaction of past and present, repetition, case histories and biographies, clinical facts and evidence, and, finally, the place of trauma and witnessing, both in the psychoanalytic encounter and in the historical field, in particular with regard to the Holocaust. By being placed at the end of the book, this chapter inevitably tries to bring a number of issues covered in the rest of the text into some kind of unity.

Chapter 12 summarizes the main issues of the text, and describes how they arose.

Although the kind of historical material with which the psychoanalyst is concerned seems at first sight rather strange, as it consists of multilayered fragments of memory, odd bits of debris from the past, dream elements, gaping absences, convincing and also unconvincing stories, a history of discontinuities and unresolved questions, of traumas, things unsaid and memories actively destroyed, there are also many ways in which such material relates to the kind of history with which the historian deals. As I have indicated, vast amounts have been written about the theory and practice of history both by practising historians and by philosophers of history, from the ancient Greeks to the present day. Though I cannot possibly cover everything that has been written on the subject, I have tried to incorporate a representative selection of historical thinkers in what follows.

My own approach to the human and hence 'ambiguous and inexhaustible' reality of the historical field (Aron 1938: 118) is to use a variety of sources, from psychoanalysis to philosophy, sociology, literary criticism and history itself, in order to enquire into the nature of history as well as the place of history in psychoanalysis. A number of the past and present preoccupations of historians and philosophers of history are very relevant to current preoccupations of psychoanalysts, such as the nature of clinical facts; questions about whether or not there are laws covering the field of psychoanalysis, and whether or not psychoanalysis is a science; issues concerning the nature of causes, interpretation, explanation, the role of the individual and of the social in understanding other minds; and the nature of the relationship between past and present realities.

I certainly think psychoanalysts have not given enough attention to the rich variety of such work, even though the historical perspective is central to their day-to-day work. The psychoanalytic encounter is soaked with historical issues. Virtually every session brings up issues about the past, the relationship between past and present, the ways in which the past may or may not influence future behaviour. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1997: 23) wrote, 'We swim in the past as fish do in water, and cannot escape from it.'

But neither can psychoanalysis escape from the complexities and paradoxes of the relationship between past and present realities. For instance, current controversies surrounding the status of memories of past child abuse recovered during dubious therapies, the so-called 'memory wars' (Crews 1997), have been used to attack psychoanalytic theory and practice, as well as the conduct of Freud towards his own findings. I will argue, using findings both from psychoanalytic practice and from my work with abused families, that the current fad, in some quarters, for 'Freud bashing' wipes out the complexities and subtleties of psychoanalytic thought, including the multilayered way in which the past and present interact. I maintain that a historical approach, with due attention to historical method, and to the nature of recovered memories, is more relevant to this field than, say, the natural science methodology; and that misunderstandings about the nature of history are partly to blame for these controversies.

The recent court case involving David Irving, who tried both to deny Hitler's responsibility for the Holocaust and to maintain that the mass destruction of Jews had been greatly exaggerated, also reveals, in albeit an extreme manner, the way in which views of history dramatically influence how we live in the present, and how the consequences of such major traumatic moments in history continue to evolve.

In contemporary psychoanalysis itself there is also an unfortunate tendency to deny the importance of the historical dimension through focusing on the so-called 'here-and-now' interpretation, what is going on between patient and analyst in the present, supposedly because what is alive in the session is the analyst–patient interaction. While, of course, the here-and-now is an important dimension of the analytic relationship, denying the equal importance of the past, of memory and its transformations, or of the there-and-then is a worrying development, as worrying in some ways as the rise of the deniers of the Holocaust and of the existence of sexual abuse; it cuts off psychoanalysis from its own history and may, as Bollas (1999: 191) has described, ironically shadow the patient's pathology, producing in the clinical setting a false self.

Perhaps the fashion for the here-and-now merely reflects a wider and widespread contemporary attitude to the past. As Hobsbawm has described rather pessimistically:

> The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in. This makes historians, whose business it is to remember what others forget, more essential at the end of the second millennium than ever before.
>
> (Hobsbawm 1994: 3)

These are certainly times when what seemed like past historical certainties are being questioned and revised. Instead of unified and continuous histories, we have

complex multilayered histories, where identities and roles of participants shift and interact in many ways. Such new views about traditional areas of historical study seem to me to offer exciting visions of how our identity has both evolved and can continue to evolve, with the past and present in continuous interaction. With this in mind, I shall endeavour to explore both how the present is shot through with the past, and how history is filled by the 'presence of the now' (Benjamin 1955: 263); and how articulating the past historically means 'seizing hold of the memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (ibid. p. 257). I also emphasize how important it is for the analytic patient to develop an historical awareness; but in addition stress that this is a highly complex matter for both analyst and patient, not something that can be simplified into, for example, the analyst just using, or not using, 'here-and-now' interpretations. Rather, it requires both analyst and patient examining the way the past interweaves organically with the present.

The way in which the role of the past in psychoanalytic treatment has been oversimplified and, indeed, distorted, highlights how the human subject in psychoanalysis and beyond is always forgetting their history, past experiences, their roots, and even the meanings of events that only recently took place; innovations become institutionalized, freezing in the present what was once alive. That is, the past needs to be constantly rethought and rediscovered in order to be regained.

One can see such rethinking of the past in much of contemporary British fiction, which has shown an increasing interest in the complex relationship between history and fiction. Such writers play with voices from the past, merging present and past characters, present and past realities. A.S. Byatt believes that these postmodern writers are returning to historical fiction:

> . . . because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because these writers are attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self. We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct sense-impressions, remembered Incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses. We like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive.
>
> (Byatt 2000: 31)

She shows in her rich study of contemporary historical fiction, *On Histories and Stories*, how narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood. Narration is certainly integral to the psychoanalytic enterprise, even though the stories brought by the patient are not quite the same as those offered by fictional or historical writers. The patient's style of speaking, the gaps between what is said, the absences and silences, reveal 'another', unconscious story, different to the one consciously narrated. I shall give two brief clinical vignettes to illustrate this point.

A man in his thirties gave a complex story of repeated childhood traumas. For political reasons he and his family were constantly on the move, rarely settling

down in one place for long. To compound this uncertainty, he was given up for adoption at a young age, abandoned by a distant mother and a father unable to cope with him. In his analysis, he found negative feelings very difficult to face. In addition, a particular quality to the way he talked in sessions began to become clear. He constantly agreed with any interpretation in a way that felt most uncomfortable. Every dream seemed to confirm what had been interpreted, as if he were really just imitating the other. He seemed to create a story about himself which used the other as a way of being, as if he had no identity himself. This seemed very much linked to his childhood way of dealing with trauma, for example having suddenly to adapt to a new caretaker, following abandonment by his parents; having to find a way of eliciting care from the other. Helping him to find a way of talking that did not merge with and lean on the other was fundamental to his analysis.

A woman in her thirties came into analysis because of depression and panic attacks. It was difficult to get through to her underlying anxieties except as breaks approached. They brought up intense feelings of loss and abandonment. There were then very fragmented sessions, with intense psychotic anxieties predominating. What seemed to make sense was that I then became in the transference like her detached mother, unable to relate affectively to her child, the mother who in reality could not pick her up when she left her. But what also began to emerge from the way this patient talked in these difficult sessions was a sense of several different voices having their say. It is difficult to convey exactly how this sense emerged, because of the fragmentary nature of what was said, but it was as if I were listening to the presence of many caretakers, rather than a central caretaker. This kind of sense was clearly related to the fact that in reality she was looked after by a whole series of nannies as a child.

Both these patients revealed aspects of their history in the way that they related their stories; what seemed important was not only to listen to the content of these stories but to the particular quality of the relating of them.

In order to understand the historical dimension, I maintain that historians can learn from psychoanalytic thinking, including how the patient's narrative can be understood, and, indeed, a number of them have done so. One could certainly argue that the current postmodern outlook on much contemporary thinking, including the historical field, with, for example, controversial debates about the status of the past, emphasis on the unsaid, the debris of the past and on the incongruity between past and present, owes a considerable amount to the more radical implications of Freud's work.

Section 1

History of events/history of layers

Chapter 2

Who killed President Kennedy?

Freud and history

Freud placed the historical issue to the forefront of his thought both at the beginning of his psychoanalytic career in *Studies in Hysteria* in 1895 and in one of his last papers, 'Constructions in Analysis', in 1937. In his early work with Breuer on the mechanism of hysterical phenomena, he wrote that at first sight it seemed extraordinary that events experienced in the distant past could still continue to operate so intensely; that unconscious memories were not deactivated, or laid to rest, by the usual processes of forgetting. 'Our observations have shown . . . that the memories which have become the determinants of hysterical phenomena persist for a long time with astonishing freshness and with the whole of their affective colouring' (Breuer and Freud 1895: 9). Such pivotal memories correspond to past traumas that have not been sufficiently worked over by three kinds of process. The first is 'abreaction', where the subject reacts to the events in deeds or words and with the appropriate emotion; without an appropriate reaction of this sort, the memories retain their traumatic quality. The second method is for the subject to bring the traumatic memories into association with other, less traumatic, thoughts, feelings and memories. 'After an accident, for instance, the memory of the danger and the (mitigated) repetition of the fright becomes associated with the memory of what happened afterwards – rescue and the consciousness of present safety' (ibid. p. 9). Third, the general tendency for memories to fade away and be forgotten wears away the intensity of the once traumatic memories.

Furthermore, not only are there contemporary effects from past memories of trauma, but the memories themselves can become traumatic in their own right; they can act as a 'foreign body' (ibid. p. 221), continuing to produce traumatic effects.

These theoretical considerations remained for some time the basis for the psychoanalytic method, which became at first a search for pathogenic recollections, and then an attempt to find ways of disposing of their traumatic effects through putting 'strangulated affects' into words, and by subjecting the memories to 'associative correction' by bringing them into consciousness. Hysterics who 'suffer from reminiscences' (ibid. p. 7) can thus be treated by the 'work of recollection' (ibid. p. 162). Already, the analyst had become a witness to past events coming to

life and also being laid to rest. Through the treatment process, past events could become 'just history'.

The psychoanalytical method developed by Freud aimed to remove symptoms and replace them with conscious thoughts, but also to 'repair all the damages to the patient's memory . . . It follows from the nature of the facts which form the material of psycho-analysis that we are obliged to pay as much attention in our case histories to the purely human and social circumstances of our patients as to the somatic data and the symptoms of the disorder' (Freud 1905: 18). The analyst thus pays attention to the significant events of everyday life, past and present. The day-to-day task of recovering small details of the 'human and social circumstances of our patients' frees the mind and defeats trauma; recovering lost history is therapeutic. Restoring lost links to the past produces relief, liberating the patient from some of the 'burdens of history' (White 1978: 27ff).

In similar terms, Bollas describes how historical thinking is a psychic function. 'Reviewing the past, retrieving fine details from it and giving them new, indeed, contemporary meanings, detraumatizes the subject who suffers from the ailments of many a thing done' (Bollas 1995: 143). Perhaps here one can see a reason why historical writings, from biography to historical narratives, retain such interest for the reading public, as if there is something essentially healing about recreating lost realities.

In his late paper 'Constructions in Analysis', Freud (1937: 255–69) returned to historical issues after a lifetime of psychoanalytical experience, bringing new and radical insights into the nature of the historical dimension. He describes (ibid. p. 257–8) how the work of analysis aims at helping the patient to give up repressions belonging to early development and replace them with more mature reactions. In order to accomplish this task, the patient must recollect forgotten experiences, together with the emotions attached to them. The raw material provided by the patient out of which lost memories are recovered includes fragments of memories in dreams, ideas produced by free association in which we can discover allusions to the repressed experiences and derivatives of the suppressed emotions, and hints of repetitions of the affects belonging to the repressed material to be found in actions, both inside and outside the analytic session; the transference relationship towards the analyst particularly favours the return of the emotional connections between the present and the past.

While the patient's task is to remember, that of the analyst is to make out or 'construct' what has been forgotten from the traces left behind by the repressed material. It is worth emphasizing here that, though analyst and patient have different tasks, Freud describes the work of construction as a joint enterprise.

He compares this work of construction, or reconstruction, to an 'archaeologist's excavation of some dwelling-place which has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed [*nicht um ein zerstörtes Objekt*]

but something that is still alive' (ibid. p. 259). That is, the analyst is dealing with a live object not a destroyed one.

Like the archaeologist who builds up the walls of a building from the remaining foundations and from the debris and traces of the past, the analyst draws inferences from the fragments of memories, associations and behaviour of the patient. Both have to face the difficult issue of what level the material belongs to. The psychical object, whose early history the analyst is trying to recover, unlike the archaeological object, is more preserved. 'Here we are regularly met by a situation which with the archaeological object occurs only in such rare circumstances as those of Pompeii or the tomb of Tut'ankhamun. All of the essentials are preserved; even things that seem completely forgotten are present somehow and somewhere, and have merely been buried and made inaccessible to the subject. Indeed, it may, as we know, be doubted whether any psychical structure can really be the victim of total destruction' (ibid. p. 260).

As Laplanche (1999: 151) has pointed out, Freud is here highlighting the kind of history with which psychoanalysis deals, one 'which is at one and the same time a cataclysm (like the engulfment of Pompeii) and a permanent preservation (like the burial of Tutankhamen's objects in his tomb).' I would add that one can also see how psychoanalysis does not deal with memory as such in the traditional sense, but with a strange, constructed reality, half-memory, half-fiction. I also think that with the more psychotic patient there may indeed be a total destruction of parts of the psychical structure, reflecting a profound disturbance in the way that the subject attempts to construct their world.

Freud's paper continues by differentiating interpretations in analysis from constructions. The former generally apply to a single element of the patient's material such as an association or a parapraxis, while constructions lay before the patient a piece of his early history which has been forgotten (Freud 1937: 261). If nothing further develops from a construction, we may infer that we have made a mistaken one. New material can allow us to make better constructions, or, one might add, hypotheses. The patient's acceptance of a construction may be of no value without some additional and indirect confirmation of its correctness, such as the bringing up of new memories, or fresh associations. Every construction is an incomplete one, as it covers only a small fragment of forgotten events; and each individual construction is a conjecture which awaits examination, confirmation or rejection (ibid. p. 265).

What follows in Freud's paper is probably more controversial and certainly resonates with current postmodern debates about the nature of the past. Freud writes that the path that leads from the analyst's construction can end in the patient's confirming recollection, but just as possible a result is the patient's conviction of the truth of the construction; and this conviction of truth may be just as therapeutic as recapturing a lost memory (ibid. p. 266). There may be a danger in relying too heavily on this sense of conviction, for it may lead the patient to accept what comes up in analysis too readily. Yet, as I shall later explore, these types of psychoanalytic explanation involve complex judgements about what takes place in the session.

and are intimately related to the type of judgements regularly made by practising historians, in which psychological motives and individual and social phenomena interact on many levels simultaneously. A chief difference, however, between the analyst and the historian appears to be one of emphasis, in that the analyst is less concerned with all the actual events that happened in the past than with what the subject has made of past experiences, that is with psychical rather than material reality, with what Freud calls 'historical' rather than 'material' truth (Freud 1939: 129).

Enigmas of the past

What can be inferred from the notion that the conviction of the truth of a construction is just as therapeutic as the recovery of a memory is that we do not have to know all about a past event for it to have significant consequences. The status of the past is problematical, not straightforward. The pastness of the past is in question. We often know that an event of some kind happened, but may never know all the details about it. There will always be limitations on the documentary evidence. For example, we still do not know for certain who killed President Kennedy[1], and we will probably never know, but we do know that he was killed, that Lee Harvey Oswald was supposed to be his assassin, and that the event and all the circumstances surrounding the event were significant. We have a powerful conviction of the importance of the events, despite, or perhaps because of, the mystery surrounding them. For those alive at the time of the assassination, it has become a nodal point in their memory, organizing the recollection of other events; it has been transformed from history into myth, a story of tragic proportions. But the enigma of the perpetrator remains.

Such enigmas are part and parcel of psychic development. There is much we can never know about what 'really happened' in early development. The infant is faced from the beginning with a multitude of unknowns, with a flood of information about which it has to make some sense, or with what Laplanche (1987: 126) has called 'enigmatic signifiers'. For example, he emphasizes how the infant is presented with the maternal breast for feeding and comfort; yet the breast is also a sexual object for both the mother and the father. The child is not yet ready to understand the sexual dimension, yet something about it is being transmitted unconsciously to the child in an enigmatic way, and the child has to deal with this inevitable 'seduction' by the adult.

The story of President Kennedy's death is constantly being redescribed and reassessed, partly as a way of dealing with the enigma of the perpetrator. We may have to live with an unsolved enigma, not knowing who killed him, but his death, like his life, is constantly being retold in different ways. As I shall explore later, to exist historically is to perceive the events one lives through as part of a story,

1 I trust that the irony of my using the example of President Kennedy's assassination is not lost to the reader, given my own name. There is no other connection between us.

perhaps later to be told. Often it is only later, in the future, that experiences the subject lives through come to have an historical dimension. Thus, those living through the horrors of the Thirty Years' War did not know at the time that the fighting was going to last that long; it was only after they had occurred that events became organized by historians around the period of thirty years. We are constantly ignorant of what will become history. Each new generation discovers that its predecessors ignored the obvious, for example that women were prevented from voting or that child abuse existed at alarming levels. One wonders what will become the next scandal, what obvious elements about the way we currently live will become the target for future historical shock. Will it, for example, be the fact that fathers seem to have less and less role to play in families? Will the demise of the father be seen by historians as the scandal of our times? What constructions will future historians put together in order to make sense of our times? Can we imagine a history of the future? Or can we say, with Benjamin (1982: 13), that every epoch dreams the one to follow it, and, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening? What current dreams will come back to awaken us from our slumbers?

The process of construction is at the heart of the thought of a number of major western historians. Thus Oakeshott (1933: 93) wrote that 'the distinction between history as it happened (the course of events) and history as it is thought, the distinction between history itself and merely experienced history, must go . . . The historian's business is not to discover, to recapture, or even to interpret; it is to create and to construct.' Or, as he later wrote (1991: 161), 'The past is a construction we make for ourselves out of the events which take place before our eyes.'

For Collingwood (1946: 240 ff), there are two criteria of historical truth. The first is a critical one, using one's critical faculties to see if an historical authority is convincing. The second is a constructive criterion, interpolating between the statements borrowed from authorities other statements implied by them. This interpolation is based on the evidence, and is a legitimate historical construction of a kind without which he argues there can be no history at all. He sees the historical imagination as the activity which bridges the gaps between what our authorities tell us, and gives the historical narrative its continuity. The historian's picture of his subject appears as a 'web of imaginative construction' stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities. This web is the touchstone by which we decide which alleged facts are genuine. One can also understand the activity of the analyst and patient in terms of the use of a web of imaginative construction in order to bridge gaps in the patient's associations, or in order to bring them to life. In this context, Berlin, commenting on Vico's concept of knowledge, describes how one recovers the past not as a collection of factual beads strung on a chronicler's string, but as a possible world of associations brought to life by imaginative insight (Berlin 1981: 117).

Ricoeur (1983) argues at length, with discussion of many historical thinkers, that history is not the history of events but the construction and understanding of plots.

Partner (1995: 33) argues that historical facts are always constructed artifacts. I have already quoted Lacapra (1985: 11), who argues that documents are texts that supplements or rework reality and do not just divulge it. White (1978: 43) argues that facts are not so much found as constructed. Kermode (1988), facing some of the issues concerned with looking back at past literary canons in relation to current preoccupations and fashions, comes to the issue of construction through describing the tension between totality and fragmentation. Thus, he shows how Conrad saw the city as full of flashing discontinuities, irrational intrusions, bewildering fragments and absurd juxtapositions; while Benjamin saw the city as a series of discontinuous shocks or shots. Yet, Kermode argues, over the philosophy of the fragment the shadow of totality inescapably broods. We cannot forget the vision of a whole; there is a permanent tension between totality and fragmentation, and between forgetting and remembering; history does not consist of mere 'off cuts'; some sort of canon in literature, however variable, is possible; values do survive.

Here one can see that construction inevitably has to face its shadow, that of deconstruction; that, as I shall explore, an historical awareness incorporates both fragmentation and cohesion.

Psychoanalysis is constantly dealing with ambiguities about the past. A literal and 'objective' knowledge of everything that took place in the past is neither possible nor necessary for understanding the history of an individual or a society. Furthermore, the kind of history with which psychoanalysis predominantly deals is one that is not that easy to capture. What Freud was aiming at, as Laplanche (1999: 148) has described, 'is a kind of history of the unconscious, or rather of its genesis; a history with discontinuities, in which all the moments of burial and resurgence are the most important of all; a history, it might be said, of repression, in which the subterranean currents are described in as much detail as, if not more detail than, the manifest character traits.'

I maintain that this kind of history is full of shifting *layers*, fragments of living reality, absences more than presences, a mutilated yet still living past, involving the elusive presence of the unconscious – *a history of layers*, with some layers following on directly from one another in time, while others merge, and yet others stand out in apparent isolation. I suggest that free association is a method of discovery in the clinical encounter that is particularly sensitive to this kind of history, as it brings to the surface elements from many different layers. Putting the associations into some sort of understandable linear narrative – the *history of events* – is also part of the clinical work, but is secondary to the history of layers, which is the main 'generator' of new meanings and connections. There is a need in a session both to develop some kind of narrative over the course of time, but at the same time to allow associations to develop from many layers of the mind.

The notion that complete reconstruction of past facts and events is the first aim of historical research merely reflects a particular model of reality, in which the subject builds up a picture of the world from observable objective facts out in the external world. The task of the historian is then to make statements which

correspond to the facts. This is basically the Cartesian model of the mind, the inner world as a reflection of the outer world, with the subject an isolated entity, only certain of its own inner workings and cut off from the social world. In the Cartesian model of the mind, the latter is a private theatre in which we inspect our thoughts and feelings and which in some way is a reflection, or copy, or representation of the external world. Knowledge is built up of an assembly of representations. As I have already discussed elsewhere (Kennedy 1998), the main problem with this model, to put it simply, is that one may ask who looks at the internal theatre and who observes the observer? Attacks on this way of thinking follow from the thought of the late Wittgenstein. Early on in his thinking, he used an essentially representational model of the mind, with 'essences' or 'objects' lying behind the world, which language reflected in its propositions. But in his later thinking, this model was abandoned in favour of one in which knowledge is no longer a matter of presenting thoughts to a knower, but of understanding the use of words in context, in social situations in which one finds oneself. Thus knowledge of oneself, the world around us and any past worlds is not a question of merely discovering more external 'objective' facts to fit a theory, but of looking at situations and contexts. Reality is constructed rather than represented or reconstructed. History is a construct; it inevitably consists of constant construction, and, I would add, the elements of the construction are inevitably fragmentary.

Furthermore, as Walsh (1967: 74ff) has discussed with regard to issues of truth and fact in history, there is no clear distinction between facts and theory; there is always a choice about what the facts are, depending on the theory. There is always an element of interpretation in what we see as facts. Or, I would add, always a *subject* doing the interpretation. Walsh argues that we cannot look for direct knowledge of past events; we can only have some contact with them, 'enabling us perhaps to divine their true shape in some degree, but not such that we can check our reconstructions by comparing them with it to see how far they are correct. For the rest, the sole criterion of truth available to us, in history, as in other branches of knowledge, is the internal coherence of the beliefs we erect on that foundation' (ibid. p. 92).

As Richard Wollheim (1959: 124) pointed out in his commentary on the work of the philosopher Bradley (1935: 9), the latter vividly attacked the naïve notion of history as a simple record of unadulterated facts, 'facts which at the moment of their occurrence were imprinted on the passive mind of the spectator, and which were then set down for all future ages to observe, or else wait in some limbo to be recovered by the patient excavator of the past.' History conceived in this way becomes 'the pursuit of a phantom for ever doomed to fade in our embraces, a mocking shadow beyond the horizon of our grasp, known to us as the unreality of all that we can hold, and whose existence must perish at the threshold of human possession' (Bradley 1935: 12–13).

Bradley greatly influenced some of the most important of modern British historians, such as Collingwood and Oakeshott, thinkers to whom I shall return on a number of occasions.

The absurdities of seeing history as complete knowledge of the past and of the possibility of a complete memory of everything that has happened is vividly highlighted in a Borges short story 'Funes, the Memorious' (Borges 1962: 97–105). In the story, Funes becomes severely disabled as a baby as a result of being thrown by a wild horse. This leaves him with a remarkable yet appalling capacity to remember everything as it happened. He can reconstruct all his dreams and fantasies. He has more memories in himself alone than all men have had since the world was a world. Despite this capacity to remember everything, Funes does not seem capable of thought, as 'to think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there was nothing but details, almost contiguous details.' Thus, the tragedy of Funes reveals that a world which aims to know all the facts is a world about which we can truly know very little; construction requires a selective imagination, the capacity to forget as well as to remember.

Danto (1965: 114) points out that there are always gaps in the historical record, and that there is no 'perfect' knowledge of the past. The quest for such 'perfection' is, indeed, not the right way of understanding history. He compares this quest with an imaginary representative artist who became so obsessed with imitating reality that he decided that only the thing itself would do as an imitation of itself. The artist duplicates a landscape using real trees, water and birds, etc. But such a perfect copy would be a failure, for he would have produced, as a consequence of his labours, not a work of art but a subject for one. Pictures leave things out, and we may say as much about the history of human affairs; this involves leaving things out and also putting things back together in a new description

The point that in the psychoanalytic encounter one does not necessarily know what actually took place in the patient's past, and that much about this past is ambiguous, means that the appropriate attitude to recovered and constructed memories arising in analysis is one of caution, something that those who attack psychoanalysis do not seem to understand. Rather than take everything that arises in analysis at face value, the usual analytic response is to accept the psychological truth of what arises without necessarily accepting its literal truth.

One can already see hints of history as construction in the Freud–Fliess correspondence of 1896, when Freud describes how memory traces are constantly being rearranged from time to time in accordance with fresh circumstances, a process which he called 'retranscription' (Freud 1985: 207). A year later, he describes the role of 'deferred action', *Nachträglichkeit*, in which early memories and experiences are revised and rearranged at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with new developmental stages. The constant rearrangement of memories creates history.

In his 1899 paper on screen memories, Freud questions whether 'we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not . . . *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time' (Freud 1899: 322).

It was only some years later in the Wolf Man case that Freud returned to this notion, where he emphasized how a scene from early life can become traumatic later, and how *Nachträglichkeit* has the effect of making the patient disregard time. Thus Freud writes of the Wolf Man, 'At the age of one and a half the child receives an impression to which he is unable to react adequately; he is only able to understand it and to be moved by it when the impression is revived in him at the age of four; and only twenty years later, during the analysis, is he able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was then going on in him. The patient justifiably disregards the three periods of time, and puts his present ego into the situation which is so long past' (Freud 1918: 45n).

André Green vividly describes the Freudian notion of time central to psychoanalytic understanding of the past in discussion with Kohon. He argues that:

> . . . *processes related to time are those that escape observation and most of them have to be deduced retrospectively*. Why? Because they took place intrapsychically, reorganizing the results of perception, affects, phantasies, wishes, etc. This is the basis for transference to occur. At the end of his life, Freud arrives at the conclusion that he has to give up the recovery of infantile amnesia, that some traumas have happened before the age of two or two-and-a-half, which cannot be recovered by memory; it can only be acted out or given an hallucinatory expression. So we have to lean on construction. Reconstruction means that you're going to find what was the real set of events which lead to the neurosis, but neurosis does not work like that, it isn't created this way. It develops in many ways, going forward, backward, mixing up people and events.
>
> (Kohon 1999b: 28)

Green is referring here to Freud's paper on constructions in analysis which clearly fits into this complex view of history. The work of construction aims less at trying to discover objective facts about the patient's past than about seeking to understand the impact of the past on the present. The psychoanalytic approach to history is not one of accumulating facts about the past to fit a scientific theory. Though there is currently enormous pressure for psychoanalysis to show the evidence for its practice, this positivistic approach runs counter to the analytic enterprise. While follow-up studies of groups of patients may well be informative in a general way about the efficacy of the psychoanalytic 'cure', in other ways analysis is looking at other kinds of questions and issues, particularly when it faces the historical dimension. As Ankersmit (1989: 137–53) has written, the latter is more concerned with the incongruity between past and present than with the past itself. However, this is not to deny a role for evidence in weighing up the impact of the past on the present. But such evidence is problematical and has to be understood in a social context and in relation to the model of reality being used by the person applying it.

Indeed, as one of my main themes in this book is that one's picture of history is dependent on one's model of the human subject, I maintain that psychoanalysis,

which is centrally concerned with the issue of human subjectivity, can make a vital contribution to understanding the historical field, for example, with an emphasis on the appearance and disappearance of the subject in history, or the place of the subject in history. History is essentially about human minds interacting with other minds across time; understanding the past includes understanding other minds, other subjectivities; history is a process encapsulating subjectivity.

It may be objected that psychoanalysis has only limited relevance to the historical field as it deals with the vagaries of individual psychology and that 'real' history is essentially concerned with social and political realities, however much individual subjects may play a part in historical events. Though true to some extent, this criticism reflects a limited view of the human subject as only located within the individual. I maintain that the structure of the human subject goes beyond the mere individual to include complex interactions in the social field (see Kennedy 1998). The subjective organization comprises both individual and collective elements; and hence the psychoanalytic field inevitably touches on areas covered by sociologists as well as historians. Also relevant here is the point that it is often the individual subject who in the end has to bear the weight of the past, for example as a victim of war, or as an actor in a complicated network of relationships, the kind of network brought to life in the drama of Oedipus at the crossroads.

The tension between seeing history in terms of human individuals or as an assembly of more or less objective facts together with their causes has existed throughout the history of history. For the 'objective' historian, individuality can be seen as 'the unusual, the exceptional, an interruption in the ordinary course of events: where the ordinary course of events means a course of events causally determined and scientifically comprehensible' (Collingwood 1946: 150). This contrasts with seeing individuality as 'just that out of which history is made' (ibid. p. 150).

Berlin faces the issue of the place of the individual and the personal in history in much of his thought. He notes that there is a naïve craving for unity and symmetry at the expense of experience in all forms of thought. 'The notion that one can discover large patterns or regularities in the processes of historical events is naturally attractive to those who are impressed by the success of the natural sciences in classifying, correlating, and above all predicting' (Berlin 1969: 43). But, he emphasizes, whatever value there is in looking for patterns and uniformities, there are other issues to be looked at in understanding the activities and characteristics of human beings, issues concerned with moral, political and religious attitudes, with human motive and responsibility. One may ask how this or that situation arose, 'Who or what was or is (or will be, or could be) responsible for a war, a revolution, an economic collapse, a renaissance of arts and letters, a discovery or an invention or a spiritual transformation altering the lives of men?' (ibid. p. 44).

The main theme of much of Berlin's writings is to preserve the notion of personal responsibility against deterministic and reductive theorizing. For him, depersonalized history is a figment of abstract theory; the personal must be incorporated into any historical theory. Instead of polarizing theories of history into personal

and impersonal ways of thinking, 'it becomes the business of historians to investigate who wanted what, and when, and where, in what way; how many men avoided or pursued this or that goal, and with what intensity; and, further, to ask under what circumstances such wants or fears have proved effective, and to what extent, and with what consequences' (ibid. p. 45). Without the power of 'entering in to' the minds and situations of others, the past will remain a dead collection of objects in a museum (Berlin 1981: 106).

But how one may place the role of the personal in the wider social context is a complex matter; where and how life can be breathed into the debris of the past requires skill, imagination and a certain amount of daring. Nor can one escape human passions. As Riccardo Steiner has described in a classic paper, there is not even any peaceful 'Arcadia' in an archive. Instead, the archive can be seen as containing the debris of the aftermath of a trauma: the author's death, the distortions produced by selections of what is left behind or produced by interpreters of the material, the inevitable fragmentary remnants of a life. One is dealing with 'all the personal and institutional implications that have ensured its being left to or collected into an archive, [which] reminds us by its very presence of absence: the absence of the author, and also of what went on beyond and before and together with what has been left to us. Indeed, even the most exhaustive collection of letters, personal memories or institutional documents exists as a reminder of the fact that we are dealing with something that, by the very fact of its being documents, and remembered, belongs to a past that is necessarily mutilated' (Steiner 1995: 740).

As Steiner also points out, while the archive bears witness to the need to preserve and save, 'This need is inextricably linked with the awareness that, through separation, lack, losses, disseminations, death is at work, even as we try to remember' (ibid. p. 755).

Around any group of surviving documents, whether or not they are collected into an organized archive, human passions play their part. One cannot ignore the role played by unconscious and unresolved factors in the personal and institutional relations that characterize any community being studied, particularly when it comes to examining the psychoanalytic community, whose object of study is the unconscious itself. In this context, one may recall that, at the time of writing, access to the Freud archive remains restricted. One may think this seems scandalous, at a time when even the archives of the KGB are open for examination!

Freud, writing and the trace

If the archive necessarily contains the debris of the aftermath of a trauma, the death of the subject, its written traces are the visible signs of the subject's erasure. As Ricoeur (1985: 119) pointed out, there is something paradoxical about the trace; it is visible here and now and yet also marks what passed before, where the past passed, like a footprint, or an animal track, evidence of the passing of the subject.

The trace is something surviving in the present but standing for something in the past; the trace survives and through it one retraces the past. But the trace is

fragile and enigmatic, its survival often fortuitous. The past as we know it, then, consists of fragile, enigmatic traces where the subject has passed. Our knowledge of the past is only ever that of a knowledge of traces, or even of traces of traces.

Elsewhere (Kennedy 1998: 3), I have used the analogy of the traces left in a ploughed field to illustrate something about the complex and elusive structure of the human subject. Applying this analogy further, one may think of a field in the country, perhaps recently ploughed. The farmer may or may not be visible at the moment you come across the field, but he has certainly left traces of his work. Across the field run a number of paths, some of them intersect one another, not necessarily in any order. The field can be used to cultivate a number of different crops, or used in a variety of ways. If you use special techniques, it may be possible to detect how the field was used in the past, where previous crops were made and old crops sewn, or where the field may have covered over a previous settlement. The recent activity may even bring to light traces of the past: pottery, bones or bits of old buildings. The field is like the human subject, with crisscrossing paths and furrows, available for multiple use, a network of traces of activity from the past and the present, and holding traces of the past available to be dug up.

The trace appears throughout Freud's work, from the the early 'Project for a scientific psychology' (1895a) onwards, mainly in terms of the place, role and problems of the existence of the 'memory-trace', which refers to the way in which events are inscribed upon the memory. From the beginning of his work, the nature of memory remains crucial to his theory and practice, whether that be in dealing with patients who cannot remember past events, those who suffer from remembering the past as in traumatic neurosis, or in theorizing about the nature of the psyche. As he put it in the 'Project', 'A main characteristic of nervous tissue is memory: that is, quite generally, a capacity for being permanently altered by single occurrences . . . A psychological theory deserving any consideration must furnish an explanation of "memory"' (Freud 1895a: 299).

As Laplanche and Pontalis (1967: 248) point out, Freud's theory of the memory trace usually has little to do with any empiricist notion of a memory impression resembling a corresponding reality, that is with a Cartesian model of the mind as reflecting the outside world. Instead, Freud offers a complicated model of memory-traces as being deposited in different systems. In the 'Project', the memory-trace is an arrangement of facilitations, or reductions of resistance to the passage of excitation, so organized that one pathway through the neurones is followed in preference to another. The main problem for any theory of memory – and this problem remains fundamental to Freud's later theorizing about the nature of the psyche – is to account for how the psychical apparatus can both retain permanent memories and yet also be able to receive fresh impressions.

Derrida (1967a: 196–231) has written a classic paper, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', which both sheds light on Freud's theory of memory and provides a grounding for Derrida's own theory of writing, itself to become the basis for much postmodern historical thought. Derrida comments that Freud deals with the issue of how to account for the permanence of the memory-trace by forging

the hypothesis of 'contact-barriers' between neurones (anticipating the subsequent discovery of synapses) and 'breaching', the French translation of *Bahnung*, or facilitation. *Bahnung* is literally path breaking, the breaking open of a path, *Bahn*.

> Whatever may be thought of the continuities and ruptures to come, this hypothesis is remarkable as soon as it is considered as a metaphorical model and not as a neurological description. Breaching, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to effraction. The path is broken, cracked, *fracta*, breached.
>
> (Derrida 1967a: 200)

In the 'Project', there are two kinds of neurones, the permeable (phi) neurones which offer no resistance and thus retain no trace, and the other (psi) neurones which oppose contact-barriers to amounts of excitation and thus retain the trace of the passing excitation, thereby affording the possibility of representing memory. An equality of resistance to breaching, or an equivalence of the breaching forces, would eliminate any preference in the choice of the route of excitation, and would thus paralyze memory. It is the difference between breaches (facilitations) which is the true origin of memory, and thus of the psyche. Only this difference enables a pathway to be preferred. Memory is represented by the differences in the facilitations between the psi neurones (Freud 1895a: 300).

> We must not then say that breaching without difference is insufficient for memory; it must be stipulated that there is no breaching without difference. Trace as memory is not a pure breaching that might be appropriated at any time as simple presence; it is rather the ungraspable and invisible difference between breaches.
>
> (Derrida 1967a: 201)

Derrida goes on to comment that the rest of the 'Project' will depend upon a radical invocation of the principle of difference, and that we repeatedly find a persistent attempt to account for the psyche in terms of spacing, a topography of traces, a map of breaches (ibid. p. 205).

Behind Derrida's focus on the role of difference there is the influence of Saussure's structural linguistics. For Saussure (1915), the language system is made up of independent terms in which the value of each term results from the simultaneous presence of the others. The value of any term is determined by its environment. What follows from this is that signs do not signify anything in themselves, but a sign marks a difference of meaning between itself and other signs. Meaning is based on differences between terms, and not on intrinsic properties of the terms themselves. Thus a word like tree only signifies a tree because it differs from other words like treat, free, tea, flea, etc.; and the concept that it signifies – the woody plant – can only be a concept because of what it is not, not a bush, not