1 Instead of an Introduction
Graham White

Jan was not pleased: her ski trip started tomorrow, she had a complicated paper to write towards her Master's degree, and it looked as if she was going to have to stay up all night to finish it. Might as well start it, though. She looked at her desk, covered with old, boring, crumbly books about Western intellectual history in the late twentieth century. The period had never attracted her: two hundred years ago, and it seemed to be horrifyingly violent, physically as well as intellectually. Obscure, too; she had tried to start on the paper several times, but had always given up when she could not keep straight the names of the faction leaders. What was the title? Oh yes, "Describe some academic controversy of the late twentieth century". Finding an academic controversy had been easy enough; a quick search of the computer databases had turned up a squabble in Cambridge between one of the local professors and a French philosopher. Who were they? Jacques Mellor? No... ah, that was it, Jacques Derrida and Hugh Mellor. Problem number one, then: who were Derrida and Mellor? That had not taken very long to find out, although she could not seem to find a comprehensible description of what Derrida thought. Problem number two: what happened at Cambridge? Mellor and other Cambridge philosophers had tried to prevent Derrida from getting an honorary degree, she found out. Ah. A boring little academic squabble of the usual sort. What did British intellectuals think about it? A collection of reprints from magazines and newspapers soon gave the answer to that one: British intellectuals were, on the whole, extremely confused by the whole thing.

So why not just write all that down and hand it in? No... she could remember her supervisor's words, tearing her last effort to shreds. "Why, Jan, why? Keep asking yourself that. You say 'first X happened, then Y, then Z' - but you never explain why it all happened. You forget that they were real people that you're talking about. What got them worked up? What turned them on? Why did they do these things to each other? And don't just read textbooks - read the sources, find out what these people said in their own words. The textbooks are mostly wrong, you know." The professor was a wonderful historian, of course. But a perfectionist. And her deadline was approaching.
So how was she to answer the professor's questions? And particularly the big question that was lurking in the background: what was this squabble really about? Let's start with an easy question: how did the two parties think of each other? Well, the Cambridge faction thought of Derrida as a European philosopher, and they thought of themselves as English philosophers. But that didn't make any sense – when she looked up the intellectual predecessors of Cambridge thought of that period – Brentano, Tarski, Wittgenstein – she found out that they came from Austria and Poland. And how was it the other way round? Well, the French thought of the English as "positivists" – but that didn't make any sense either, because positivism had been invented in France by a man called Comte a couple of hundred years before that, and in any case the English just weren't positivists. She did find out – a wonderfully obscure fact, this would really impress her supervisor – that a few imitators of a Viennese movement called "logical positivism" had been active for a while in England about thirty years before the Derrida incident; but they seemed too early and too insignificant to matter. So all that was a dead end.

If the parties' own descriptions of the conflict don't make any sense, she thought, then maybe there were still good reasons for it; maybe they just had different styles of thought, different authorities, that sort of thing. So who did both sides consider as authorities? First, the Cambridge lot. They seemed to be very fond of logic. At least, they said they were. Jan felt a flicker of interest – after all, she wanted to one day write her doctoral thesis on the history of logic. "So let's have a look," she thought, "at some of this stuff. But no... what's that? They can't still be using first order predicate calculus? In 1990? I'm confused." The research for this paper was one incomprehensible fact after another. The Europeans were no more tractable: they said that their work was based on history and the human sciences. "So", Jan thought, "I'm taking nothing for granted – I'll look at some of the history that Derrida uses." Thus it was that she spent two hours tracing Derrida's opinions on "the Western metaphysical tradition" – first back to Heidegger's historical remarks, and then back from Heidegger to Brentano's historical works (a difficult one that, Heidegger never used footnotes) and back from Brentano to some other nineteenth century histories of philosophy. But this meant that, despite Derrida's appeals to history, many of the things he said were based on historical research that was not only, in his time, a hundred years out of date, but also known to be wrong when he was writing.

Four a.m. Anything to show for this? "I seem to have gone backwards. When I began, I thought I could tell a story. Now I can't even tell a story." She rested her head in her hands and tried to concentrate. "Maybe